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ABSTRACT

The role of the Iowa Ambassador to Education is to be a liaison between the state department of education and primary and secondary schools. To prepare for the year of conversations across the state, the ambassador formulated three questions that she asked everywhere she went: 1) What is good about your school? 2) What would you change to improve the quality of learning? and 3) Does the school have a school improvement plan? This report presents the information and thoughts that resulted from grouping the answers into categories and converting them to usable data. Six categories emerged from the first two questions: organizational structure of schools, quality of education and instruction, resources for schools, governance of schools, school culture, and people and relationships. Each category is discussed, beginning with a graph depicting items most mentioned in response to the first two questions. Themes raised by the third question include why some respondents had only a vague knowledge of a plan, the process involved in creating plans, the results of planning, ownership of the plan, and criticisms of school improvement plans. A fourth question was posed to approximately 30 administrators and teachers: How do we know when students learn? Eight vignettes scattered throughout the report provide insights into the issues discussed. An appendix presents the ambassador's schedule. (TD)

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Learning Iowa

by Jan Mitchell

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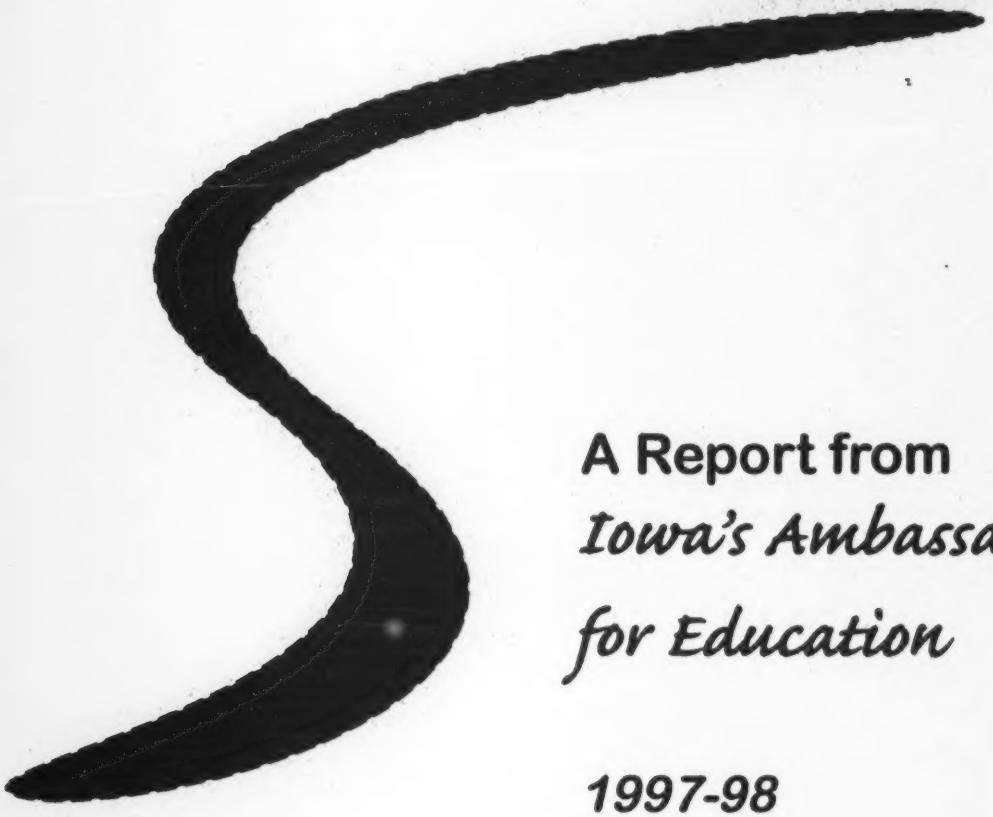

A Report from *Iowa's Ambassador for Education*

1997-98

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Learning Iowa

by Jan Mitchell

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Learning Iowa

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank the many people in the schools and communities across the state who have welcomed me and given me the opportunity to work in the schools with staff and students and out in the communities with people who care about education.

I also wish to express my gratitude to Ted Stilwill and Susan Fischer for their consul and support, to Judy Jeffrey and Debra Van Gorp for help validating the categories, to Dave Alvord and Greg Truckenmiller for technical assistance with the survey data, and to Sharon Willis for the cover design.

In addition, I am grateful to the Marshalltown School District not only for giving me autonomy and the opportunity to grow as an educator but also for the beginnings of my concept of *learning community*.

Finally—and especially—my appreciation to Don Mitchell who encourages me to find new challenges and to stretch to my potential.

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Table of Contents

Learning Iowa

1	Introduction	5
2	A Story: Interviewing Brittany	6
3	An Overview	7
4	Organizational Structure of Schools	9
5	Quality of Education and Instruction	13
6	A Story: The Rainmaker	20
7	Resources for Schools	21
8	Governance of Schools	25
9	A Story: The 'Dug Out' Group	29
10	A Story: Listening to the Community	30
11	School Culture	31
12	A Story: Banking Day	36
13	People and Relationships	37
14	A Story: But—It's Not a School Day	41
15	A Story: The Multi-Age Class	42
16	School Improvement	43
17	Learning Matters	49
18	A Story: The Video Project	52
19	Revisiting The QuestionS	53
20	Appendix	55

An Introduction

Learning Iowa
1

The Code of Iowa describes the role of Ambassador to Education as an education liaison to primary and secondary schools in the state. Duties of the Ambassador include providing seminars and workshops and speaking at public gatherings in the state. In the interest of improved communication between Iowa schools and the Department of Education, the Ambassador is a listener as well.

I knew that an entire year of conversations across the state would produce an abundance of information. I imagined myself going school to school, listening to their stories, journaling them into my memory. Even so, I worried that at the end of the Ambassador experience, I wouldn't know what I had listened to.

So I strategized. Thinking it helpful to learn what people value about their schools and how schools prepare for change, I formulated three questions:

1. What is good about your school?
2. What would you change to improve the quality of learning?
3. Does the school have a school improvement plan?

I asked the questions at schools when I presented workshops or staff development sessions. I asked the questions when I gave talks at service club meetings or met with community groups. I interviewed key people in school districts on film.

By April, I had 2815 notecards from individuals who had written answers to the questions. By May, I had 150 interviews with answers to the same questions recorded on video tape.

This report is not my story but the story of Iowa schools told in the voices of people in schools and communities across the state. Through their words we learn what's important, what changes they would make, and what they know about the school improvement process.

It is my belief that the comments—when examined collectively—show perceptions worthy of our notice.

Learning Iowa
2

Interviewing Brittany

A Story

Brittany eyed my camcorder as she waited for her teacher-mom to bring the principal in for an interview.

The first grader nodded when I asked if she wanted to be filmed. I told her that I would ask the same questions as I had the others.

"Tell me what's good about your school," I said, camera focused and taping.

She hesitated, rolled her eyes upward to think. I could see the idea enter her brain before she confided, "We get to go outside."

As Iowa's Ambassador for Education, I identify with what for Brittany was a childish excitement about going outside. This year has been a year of learning outside my classroom. My work, my education has been outside, in Iowa's schools.

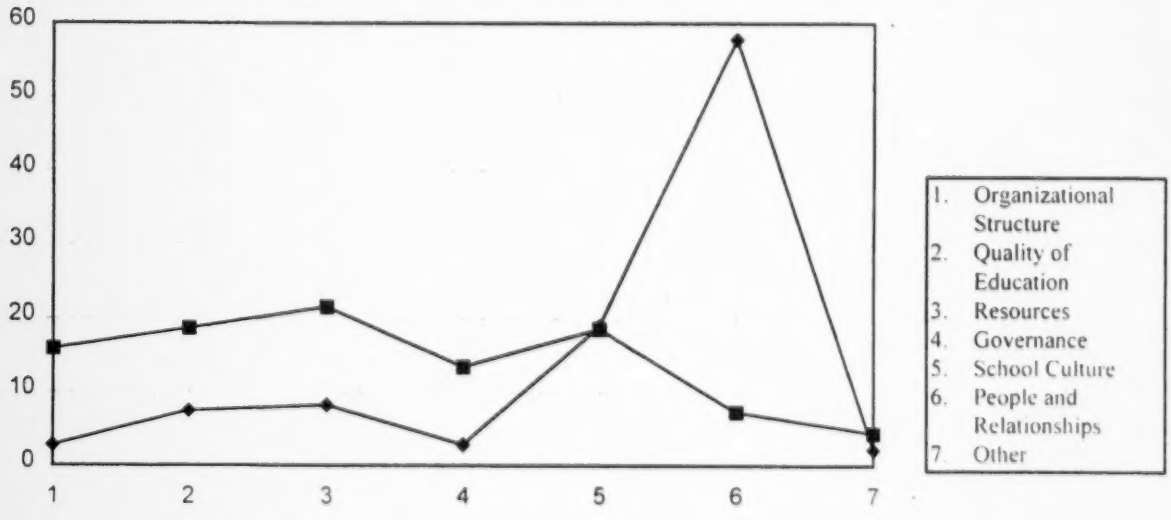
An Overview

Gathering information through my contacts with schools and community groups was but a first step. Reading the answers, grouping them in categories, validating the categories with help from other readers, and converting the answers to numbers for data entry followed. The big picture includes some predictable information and, perhaps, a surprise or two.

Six categories emerged from the answers to the first two questions.

- Organizational Structure of Schools
- Quality of Education and Instruction
- Resources for Schools
- Governance of Schools
- School Culture
- People and Relationships

What's good about your school?
What would you change to improve the quality of learning?
Comparison Chart : All Responses



Percentages are of total responses to the question

◆ What's good...?
■ What would you change...?

Does Your School have a School Improvement Plan?
Table: All Responses

Yes	75 %
No	4 %
In the Process	2 %
Don't Know	10 %
Other	9 %

Percentages are of total responses to the question

The Responders

The first two questions, which were open-ended, often prompted more than one response. I categorized up to three responses per responder. The following table shows information related to the responders and responses.

	1st Question	2nd Question
Total number of responders	2815	2815
Total number of responses	4182	3510
Responses from teachers	3338	2819
Responses from administrators	254	184
Responses from parents	126	121
Responses from community members	153	184
Responses from school board	21	15
Responses from support staff	218	172
Responses from school volunteers	26	24
Responses from students	15	12

It seemed helpful to divide the responders into two groups. One group, by far the larger number of responders, I refer to as the In-School Group. They are the ones who shape their perceptions of schools from the inside—the teachers, administrators, support staff, and students. I call the second group the Non-School Group. They are more likely to shape their views from the outside. The number of responses for each group is shown for the total survey and each category of responses.

	Q #1	In-School Q #1	Non-School Q #1	Q #2	In-School Q #2	Non-School Q #2
Total All Survey	4182	3825	357	3510	3197	313
Org. Structure	114	88	26	559	514	45
Qual. of Educ.	309	227	82	655	553	102
Resources	341	310	31	759	716	43
Governance	118	107	11	471	448	23
School Culture	792	740	52	654	588	66
People/Relation.	2418	2275	143	257	247	10

Organizational Structure of Schools

Learning Iowa
4

The length of the school year, full-day kindergarten, the schedule of the school day, how students are grouped, what grades/levels are housed in one building, whether or not elementary students attend a neighborhood school, the activities and opportunities for students, the amount of time for planning and collaboration—all are issues related to the organizational structure of schools.

What about the organizational structure of schools is most valued by Iowans?

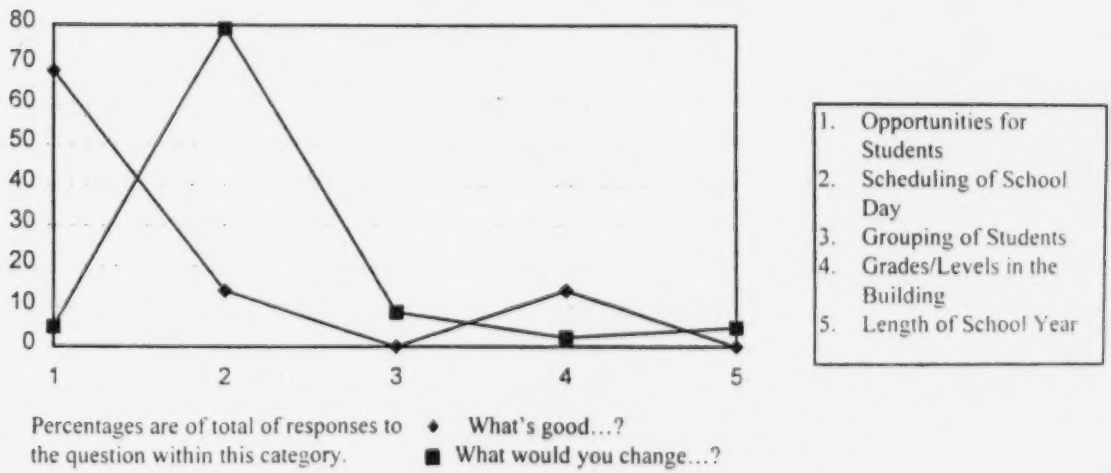
The items most mentioned in this category when asked *What's good about your school?*:

- Opportunities for Students
- Scheduling of the School Day
- Grades and Levels in the Building

The items most mentioned in this category when asked *What would you change to improve the quality of learning in your school?*:

- Scheduling of the School Day
- Groupings of Students

Organizational Structure Chart: All Responses



Percentages are of total of responses to the question within this category.

◆ What's good...?
■ What would you change...?

Opportunities for Students

Educators and non-educators alike praise schools for the many choices and opportunities available to students.

Whether the performing groups available, the field trips, the after-school activities, choices within the course offerings, the opportunity to take college classes within the high school day, or the availability of school-to-work programs, Iowans like the idea of providing opportunities for students.

More than sixty-eight percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the Organizational Structure category dealt with opportunities for students.

"We have excellent extra-curricular offerings."
Parent

Sports, music, speech were among the many answers. Not surprisingly, such replies came from community members as well as people more connected with the school.

More than half of all responses about opportunities for students were about extra-curricular programs or activities.

"The ICN gives more opportunities to learn through courses we couldn't offer here."
Administrator

In addition to listing one or more of the programs or activities, comments relate to the strength of the program, the many students who participate, or the potential to excel in the activity.

Answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* related to opportunities for students include better vocational and technical course offerings, summer school for elementary students, after-school tutoring, more field trips, more outside learning.

Other items on the wish lists for opportunities were more course offerings, more opportunities for students who have difficulties, more options for students, and better curriculum choices through the ICN.

"...more opportunities for kids who have potential but not good at book knowledge."
Support Staff

The few who list extra-curricular programs as something to *Change to Improve the Quality of Learning* think the school and parents should place less emphasis on extra-curricular programs (sports was usually named) or that the program or activity takes students away from classroom learning.

Scheduling of the School Day

Time and how it's divided into a school-day schedule is important—particularly to people in the schools.

Fourteen percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the Organizational Structure category had to do with the School Day Schedule. Block scheduling was the most frequent answer.

Nearly eighty percent of all answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* in the Organizational Structure category show frustration with schedules in Iowa's schools.

Scheduling of the School Day (continued)

Common themes are the need to have more time to teach, more time with students, longer class periods, longer school days, more time for the core curriculum, more lab time, and more time with students who are not performing satisfactorily.

"My teachers need time for joint planning and interdisciplinary projects."
Administrator

Many teachers express a need for time to work one-on-one with students, for more time to plan, and for more time for collaborative planning with teaching teams.

"...more flexible scheduling to do co-curricular units and team teaching."
Teacher

In addition, some want an earlier start to the school day, to eliminate early (Wednesday) dismissal, to eliminate study halls from the daily schedule, and to add a milk break. A school volunteer wants shorter days in an extended school year to accommodate students with a short attention span.

Many would change to block scheduling, although a few would change from block scheduling to a traditional schedule.

A few would require more P.E., scheduling it every day; one wants P.E. only one hour a week. Several want to add all-day, every day kindergarten.

Fewer class periods per day would satisfy some respondents, while others want to experiment with before- and after-school class times.

"There shouldn't be a timeline on learning."
School Board Member

Teachers indicate that they need time to plan and to think about student needs. Others say that planning time is needed to implement desired changes in the district, to develop interesting projects, to incorporate technology.

While a couple of teachers want fewer meetings, a more popular idea is to have more time with colleagues. They would use the time, they say, for communication with staff members, more time to talk about student concerns, for more discussion of issues, and planning for change.

Grouping of Students

Not one answer to *What's Good About Your School?* was related to grouping of students.

When asked *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?*, nearly nine percent of all who responded with answers in the Organization of Schools category would change the way students are grouped.

Most would make changes related to inclusion. Comments indicate a strong perception that inclusion is not meeting the needs of children and interferes with learning of other children.

"We need ability grouping instead of grade levels."
Teacher

Removing behaviorally disabled children from regular classrooms was a frequent comment, and a school-within-a-school plan was suggested.

"Limit the inclusion of students with multiple needs."
Administrator

Others want multi-age classes, elementary groups based on developmental levels, a wider range of students in vocational classes, or no tracking at all.

Grouping of Students (continued)

Another issue surfaced related to group work. Conflicting comments, all made by parents, show either the hope that students could be put into groups of fairly equal ability more often or the wish that the grouping of students to do collaborative work would be curtailed.

One comment worth noting is the suggestion to have better economic distribution of students throughout elementary classrooms.

The Building: Location, Grades/Levels

Fourteen percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the Organizational Structure category listed an idea related to the grade levels of students in the building or where the school is located.

A few responses—all from parents or community members—show that a few people still value neighborhood schools.

"It would be better if my children could go to a school in our neighborhood."
Parent

Two respondents to the *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* question want to go back to neighborhood schools in their school districts.

Neighborhood schools may be desirable to some parents, but people in schools have other ideas.

Other responders to *What's good about your school?*--four times more than those who like the idea of a neighborhood school—have pride related to the grade levels in their buildings.

Many like having all grades under one roof. Some explain that their staff has good communication because they are in one building. Others are positive about their districts' grade level centers.

"Having a K-12 building helps us have better articulation of our curriculum through all the levels."
Administrator

While only two percent of all *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* responses within the Organizational Structure category were related to the grades or levels in a building, all indicated that centralization of grades or levels is good for learning.

"...one elementary building to all students can have access to all the resources."
Teacher

Reasons for consolidating all elementary classes into one building are to have less busing, better student access to all resources, and more collaboration of same-grade teachers.

Length of the School Year

No one in the survey listed the length of the school year as something good about the school, but twenty-six responses to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* see lengthening the school year as a benefit to learning. Nearly all said it would improve retention.

"Increase the number of education days so less would be lost over long vacations."
Community Member

One related comment from an administrator: "We would improve learning if we would change Iowa from a 180 days attendance rule to a standards-based competency state."

Quality of Education and Instruction

Learning Iowa
5

High expectations, the importance of academics, achievement and performance of students, meeting diverse needs of students, curriculum, teaching methods, testing and assessment, real-world applications to learning, use of technology—all are issues related to the quality of education and instruction in schools.

What about the quality of education and instruction in schools is most valued by Iowans?

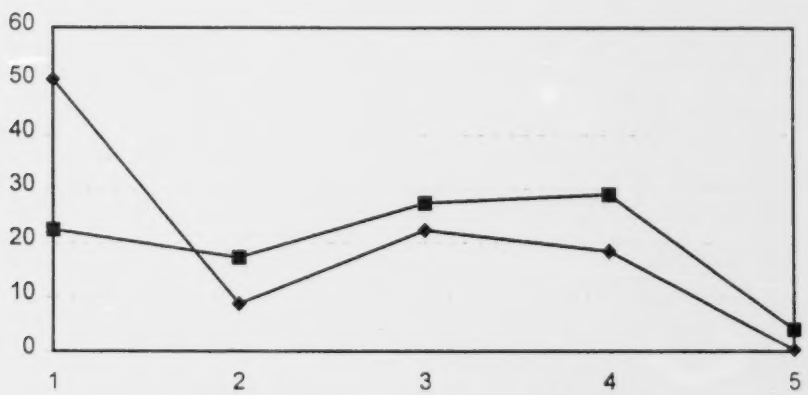
The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What's good about your school?*:

- Quality of Education and Achievement
- Curriculum

The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What would you change to improve the quality of learning in your school?*:

- Teaching Practices
- Curriculum

Quality of Education/Instruction Chart: All Responses



1. Quality of Education and Achievement
2. Meeting Students' Needs
3. Curriculum
4. Teaching Practices
5. Testing and Assessment Practices

Percentages are of total of responses to the question within this category.

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Quality of Education and Achievement

Answers to the survey reinforce a commonly-held perception that Iowa schools provide quality education.

Using wording such as excellent education, high expectations, strong academic programs, and commitment to student achievement, fifty percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the Quality of Education category list ideas related to the general concept of quality education and achievement.

What's good?
"Our commitment to excellence."
Administrator

"Our school tries hard to be 'up' on things and to be very academic."
Teacher

Several responses to *What's Good...?* are specific to education for students planning to go to college: "we do a good job preparing students for college," and " good college-bound track" are typical comments.

Expectations emerge as important. Many comments show pride in a school's high standards, rigorous approach to learning, and high academic expectations. Some state that "we want the best." A few mention high standards for both students and staff.

"Academics are important here," say some responders. Other comments include the idea that the school and community gives a high priority to academics.

Respondents use phrasing to suggest that student achievement is good in their schools. Their descriptions show their schools as places with high potential for student achievement or academic success. They also depict school as a place which gives students excellent outcomes from education as seen in the achievements of the graduates.

"...the high quality of the graduates and their achievements as adults."
Community Member

Answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning* include the general idea of improving quality, improving preparation for college, and strengthening the belief that every child will learn.

Several want earned promotions to higher grade levels while others want increased requirements for graduation. A few want more challenges for students by adding Advanced Placement courses and giving incentives for students to take rigorous courses. Some think it important to decrease inflated grades.

"I would require competency exams for all students before passing to the next level."
Parent

"We need improved academic standards."
Community Member

"To improve quality, we need an incentive and support for excellence."
Support Staff

One responder suggests that raising standards and expectations would not work without a concerted effort by school personnel with the support of the community.

Another reminds that the students need to buy in to high expectations: "What to change? We need to move students to greater expectations."

A similar response was "We need higher expectations and the determination of learners and teachers to work toward these expectations."

All seem to believe that higher expectations will increase student learning.

Quality of Education and Achievement (continued)

Expectations and accountability became yoked: "I would like to have higher expectations for everyone from the principal to the students—attendance, attitude, quality of work, meeting deadlines, etc." Others see a need for teachers and parents to have higher expectations for the quality of student work.

"More emphasis on the classroom would help the quality of learning."
Administrator

One teacher's ideas about expectations were stated: [We need to] "establish high academic standards, develop assessments of those standards, and report the results to the community."

"Keep academics on top with a good mix of extra-curricular offerings."
Support Staff

Of those who would increase the importance of academics, a significant number would increase emphasis on "basic academics" and classroom learning time. Concentrating on "major subjects" while eliminating some electives or specials would improve quality, according to other responses.

"More emphasis on academics vs. extra-curricular."
Teacher

Some see the need for an attitude change toward valuing academics, citing that school should be important. Getting students to prioritize and put academics first is one suggestion, yet another thinks the community needs to put more emphasis on students' setting goals to attend college as a way for academics to be more important.

"Make sports not so emphasized."
Community Member

More responses see extra-curricular activities (especially athletics) as lessening the importance of academics both for students and in the community. One respondent who included the words *I'm a coach* said, "Make learning #1—not sports."

A few comments indicate a need to make changes in the achievement or performance of students to improve the quality of learning. Most are framed in the context of accountability for achievement.

Meeting Students' Needs

In an ideal school, all students needs would be met. Nearly nine percent of the *What's Good About Your School?* comments that fell within the Quality of Education category favor that ideal, saying that their school is dedicated to or making a collective effort to meet all students' needs. One responder appreciates the "freedom to try innovative programs to meet individual needs."

Iowans would probably like to have ideal schools, but seventeen percent of all *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* answers within the Quality of Education category are from individuals who see more work to be done to meet the diverse needs of students.

"We need to reach all kids."
Administrator

"Teachers need to remember that their classes are made up of individuals."
Support Staff

Some changes are couched in general terms, suggesting a greater acceptance of different student abilities, a better assimilation of all students, a diversification of classes to help all students learn. Others want more emphasis on individual needs, accommodation of individual learning styles, flexibility in meeting individual differences, and greater appreciation of students' feelings.

Meeting Students' Needs (continued)

Citing "special education" or "special needs" students, some respondents say that more help is needed, better accommodations should be made, or teachers need to be more flexible.

"Provide a different alternative for students who choose not to participate in learning."
Teacher

Some responders would make school more challenging for at risk students, while others are in schools which they describe as needing to add an at-risk program. More aides to help with students having trouble, better ways to work with problem students, and more help for drop out students are common responses.

Average and low-achieving students were considered, as well. Answers show that those surveyed have some interest in more help for struggling students or more support for non-academic students—sometimes referred to as "the non-college bound."

The quality of learning would increase, according to one teacher, if we would "gear our classes toward the needs of the average student." Another teacher would like to see more courses to accommodate the lower one third in ability.

"I would like to see more geared for the majority in the middle."
Parent

One parent voices the impatience of those who perceive schools as over-investing in students who slow down the pace of learning of others: "Schools need to stop trying to make everyone learn at the same pace and give more attention to average and above-average students."

More time and support for talented and gifted students was listed as well. Respondents want higher-level students offered more and "time for super learners to expand." A teacher would like students to have more time and emphasis on the arts to meet a child's needs for right-brain stimulation.

Curriculum

Iowans have an interest in the curriculum taught in Iowa schools. In fact, over twenty-two percent of the *What's Good About Your School?* comments that fell within the Quality of Education category applaud the curriculum of the school district in which the responder works or resides.

What's good?
"My staff's planning for an integrated curriculum."
Administrator

Many directly stated "the curriculum" while others included descripters: quality curriculum, solid curriculum, a research-based curriculum, well-rounded curriculum, broad curriculum.

"My school has strong support for all areas of the curriculum."
Teacher

The value of offering wide choices is seen in these comments: wide variety of subjects taught, excellent course selection, diversity of class offerings, many curriculum choices, many course offerings. Cross-curricular units, interdisciplinary planning, and the implementation of an applied curriculum are also listed as positive qualities of schools.

A few responders centered comments on the reading program. Their schools are either focusing on early intervention or the development of a stronger reading curriculum. One teacher stated, "We are working together to develop a clearer phonics curriculum. We all include more phonics but want no gaps."

About twenty-eight percent of all *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* answers within the Quality of Education category focused on curriculum issues.

Although having freedom to try innovative curriculum is valued, according to a few respondents, more say it would improve learning if a complete curriculum guide were available or the written curriculum had the benchmarks in place.

"We need more authority and/or ability to implement the curriculum or write it."
Teacher

Others want more input in curriculum decisions or the opportunity to work cooperatively with others on curriculum up-dates.

A sampling of answers shows a belief that curriculum articulation aids continuity and that more curriculum work is needed in some schools for smoother curriculum transitions.

"We need more focus on language arts and agreement on a series for K-12 continuity."
Teacher

A significant number of comments gives evidence of the perception that the curriculum drives the learning. To increase learning, respondents would "beef up" the curriculum, revise it to reflect best practices, or rewrite to create a stronger curriculum.

One of the two most frequently mentioned ways curriculum could increase learning is by offering more courses or increasing course selection. The most frequently mentioned way was to teach the basics. Most suggest more emphasis on one or more of the following: reading, writing, arithmetic, phonics.

Those who would change the reading program to increase student learning want better reading programs, more reading support, a better organized reading program, a new reading series, more emphasis on Reading Recovery, and a move away from Whole Language.

Others would add more time for reading instruction in the upper grades, offer a required reading improvement course at the junior high level, or give high school students an elective reading course.

Another important type of response in this area is the need for more interdisciplinary teaching to increase learning. Some teachers would like the curriculum to be more theme-based with all the subjects incorporated.

"More effort at integration in learning."
Administrator

"... a collaborative environment that recognizes the arts as a curricular subject and fosters respect for it."
Teacher

Finally, others have specific ideas about what should be included in the curriculum.

A community member wants more emphasis on teaching civics, citizenship, and political science to create better informed voters.

A parent wants schools to teach more on character. A teacher would like foreign languages to be taught in the elementary school. Others mentioned an arts curriculum and better technical curriculum.

Teaching Practices

Innovations in the classroom, creative teaching methods, a variety of teaching styles, teaching all subjects with an integrated approach, and teachers who use methods that turn kids on to learning were all listed as answers to *What's Good About Your School?* Over eighteen percent of all responses to that question that fell within the Quality of Learning category relate to teaching practices.

Some comments show support for "hands-on" learning and practices which expose students to real-world applications for learning. School-to-work efforts and vocational experiences gained attention as ways to "make learning real."

"We have a lot of students who are excited about school because teachers make school interesting for them."
Teacher

The use of technology in schools appeared frequently. Comments about the respondents' schools show that educators there know the importance of technology for today's students and are "very progressive" about using technology in the classroom. Some cite gains made in computer literacy.

What's good?
"Our students get individual attention from teachers."
School Board Member

Individual attention to students is important, according to comments about schools. Responders say that students receive individual help according to their needs, we give a lot of individual and small-group attention, and students have opportunities for one-on-one attention.

Many explain the strength of individual attention in terms of the size of the school. A typical comment: "We are a small school so we know our students more on a personal level and can work with them more one-on-one."

Almost thirty percent of the answers to *What would you change to improve the quality of learning?* in the Quality of Learning and Instruction category show a belief that changes in teaching methods will improve the quality of learning.

"What would I change? --the way teachers teach."
Student

The perception is that more students learn when teachers use a variety of strategies. The parent proposes more methods of teaching for different children. The administrator wants improved teaching styles to target greater numbers of students. The support staff member would like to see teachers adapt teaching methods to help all students.

Use of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies is important to a few responders, while others say that teachers need to up-date what they do: use best practices, stop using old notes, replace the lecture method.

"More applied or hands-on learning. ....Address multiple intelligences in teaching/learning."
Teacher

Many list the need to include more "hands-on" learning, to plan more experiential, project-oriented lessons.

Others want more cooperative learning, more student-centered projects and activities, more problem-solving, and one would "turn learning over to students" as a way to improve the quality of learning.

Teaching Practices (continued)

More teaming of teachers in the classroom would improve learning, according to one teacher. Another thinks strategies which "connect different disciplines" would make classes more active and interesting and help children learn.

"We need to give students more learning opportunities to transfer skills learned."
Administrator

Many responders would equip students for the real world by involving them in real life activities, by getting them into the community for experiential learning, by more job shadowing, or by providing work programs for senior students.

"Students need more chances to get real-life, hands-on experience in the community."
Teacher

Others would provide real-world applications in the classroom by teaching life-skills, giving more "real-life" situations, or integrating more school-to-work in the curriculum. Some suggest more exposure to career choices within the curriculum.

Others see a need to work within specific courses, suggesting schools improve technical classes, add more vocational time and classes, or offer more functional offerings for non-college students or those who plan to go to technical school.

Iowans see a need for increased use of technology for all students, better use of technology, more student access to computers and software, more student-centered use of technology, and more use of technology to focus on problem-solving.

One teacher would like to "get the ICN room going." A community member sees the ICN as having potential to increase learning. Some in schools not yet hooked up to Internet see Internet access as tied to student learning.

"Students need more individualized attention."
Parent

"We need more time for individual students."
Support Staff

The idea of individual attention or instruction emerged as responders told about changes to improve learning. Some answers listed more one-on-one or individual attention, yet others phrased it as "help" for individual students.

Testing/ Assessment Practices

A few Iowans are thinking about testing and assessment in schools. Only one, however, mentions it as a strength. A parent said that the school her children attend "actively involves students in learning evaluation."

Some who would change testing/assessment practices state the need for re-evaluation of assessments and the improvement of testing. Administrators and teachers want better information about students' performance and better individual assessment programs.

"Find out what they're learning and what they're not and how they best demonstrate learning."
Teacher

A few are interested in minimum competency testing, described by one as "mandatory evaluations to advance grades." Others want less testing and more attention to individual needs.

Learning Iowa
6

The Rainmaker

A Story

"Ma'am," he said. "Do you know how to spell *al-luminum*?" He was drawing on a poster-weight paper the size of the table top where he worked.

I walked over and spelled a-l-u-m-i-n-u-m then wondered why he needed to know.

"I'm s'posed to tell my class why it rains," he stated, matter-of-factly.

He had written out *aluminum* and drawn an arrow to his illustration. He continued to draw but explained, "See, this is a glass jar. Inside is hot water that steams up like this." He pointed to a series of lines that squiggled upward.

"On top of the jar is this *al-lumimum* pan with holes in the bottom." He took a minute to write *H-O-L-E-S* and arrow the word toward the pan. "The ice cubes in the pan melt with the steam and then water drops down—see RAIN!"

"Did you learn about this in your science class?" I asked.

"No, they're going to learn it from me," he replied.

Resources for Schools

Learning Iowa 7

Money, facilities, instructional materials, technology equipment and assistance, training, staff—all are issues related to the resources available to Iowa schools.

What about resources for schools are most valued by Iowans?

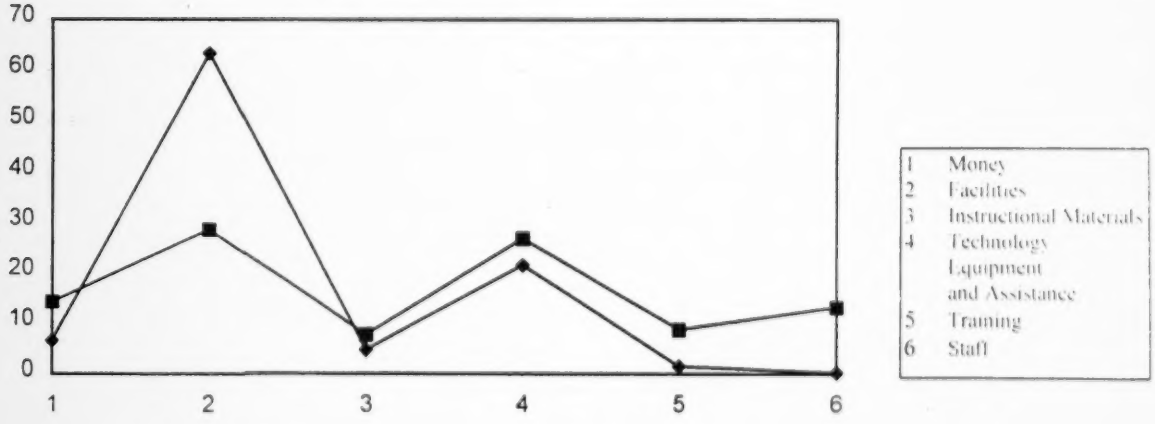
The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What's good about your school?*:

- Facilities
- Technology Equipment and Assistance

The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What would you change to improve the quality of learning in your school?*:

- Facilities
- Technology Equipment and Assistance

Resources for Schools Chart: All Responses



Percentages are of total of responses to the question within this category.

◆ What's good...?
■ What would you change...?

Money

One teacher, when asked *What's Good About Your School?*, stated, "We have a wealth of resources."

A reading of all answers shows, however, that few would agree in the context of money available to schools. Several did say the pay was good, and a few thought the school district had good financial support for the purchase of supplies and instructional materials.

"Equitable funding for schools with a declining enrollment."
Community Member

"We need more monetary support—especially for the arts."
Teacher

"Better funding from within the district."
Teacher

Five times more responses that dealt with money were listed as answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?*, representing fourteen percent of all answers to that question in the Resources for Schools category.

Common answers are "more money" and "bigger budget." Others want more budget freedom or no money cuts. Community and school board members—not teachers—list teachers' salaries as something to change. One wants teachers to be paid by "quality."

Most comments are directed toward the need for money to buy books, to purchase up-to-date materials, to fund programs, to use for technology.

Some in districts planning for bond issues linked the community support of the bond issues to the improvement of learning in the district, while others would change the state funding restrictions tied to enrollment growth.

Facilities

The buildings in a school district—perhaps more than anything else—provide a visual symbol of a school's well-being. What a school looks like and how it serves students and the community impacts perceptions about education in the district.

Over sixty-three percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* within the Resources for Schools category were about facilities. Most use adjectives like *nice*, *great*, *wonderful*, and *good* to describe a building or the buildings in the district.

"What's good? A well-maintained physical plant."
Teacher

"Our new middle school."
Community Member

"A bright environment to teach in."
Teacher

Other positive comments about facilities specify a certain classroom or area of a school. A few praise new construction or the fact that the buildings are all on one site.

One teacher (one of many who have had to travel from room to room?) said it was good to have a classroom to teach in.

Over twenty-eight percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* in the Resources for Schools category had concerns related to facilities.

Many state that updating and improving facilities would help learning in their districts.

Facilities (continued)

The need for additional space was frequently mentioned. Larger classrooms are needed, according to some, for the large class sizes.

"Better classrooms and facilities in general."
Teacher

Some say they need space to have more room for activities or to accommodate needs of special education students. Many responders also see a need for more classrooms.

"We need larger special education rooms."
Support Staff

Some responders would build onto the existing structures. Reasons they list are to provide more room for technology, to provide a new library and classrooms, new science facilities, or a room "that is planned and built as an art room."

"We could use a new facility—the quality would have some exciting newness."
Teacher

"I wish I had my own classroom."
Teacher

New buildings would answer some districts' needs. Some want new high school buildings; others need a new school built to be handicapped accessible.

The idea of updating facilities by building new structures surfaced in several answers. One teacher would build because the use of portable classrooms creates problems.

Better maintenance and cleaner facilities would help in a couple of districts. In one district with every-other-day cleaning, a teacher remarked, "... go back to daily janitorial service."

Adding air-conditioning is a popular concept. One teacher would like a new room with adequate space and ventilation. Another wants better playground equipment for the students.

Instructional Materials

A few answers to *What's Good About Your School?*—about five percent of all that dealt with Resources for Schools—listed availability of supplies and instructional materials.

"More literature and science books and hands-on materials."
Teacher

Nearly eight percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* fell within the Resources for Schools category.

"We could use some newer looking reading books."
Support Staff

Two out of every three listed the need for books, citing the lack of funding to up-date what they currently use. Others specified insufficient resources for student reading or hands-on materials.

Technology Equipment and Assistance

People—both in and outside schools—recognize the challenge of equipping schools with technology, training teachers to work with new technology, and troubleshooting the glitches.

Over twenty-one percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* answers in the Resources for Schools category applaud the resources for technology in their districts.

Many list simply *technology* or *good technology*, but others were more specific: "networked technology," or "our advanced technology."

Technology Equipment and Assistance (continued)

The importance of access to technology emerged as responders told about computers in each classroom, availability of technology to students and staff, and the computer lab.

"We need more computers" or "Improved Technology" are representative of the more than twenty-six percent of all answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* in the Resources for Schools category.

"Increase technology availability."
Parent

"We need better and more dependable technology."
Teacher

More specific answers indicate that access to technology—either computers in every classroom or computer labs available to all students—should be a concern to improve the quality of student learning.

Others want up-dates, replacements to old equipment, or additional printers to "carry the printing load." Some see increased Internet access convenient for student use as important.

The need for money to buy support materials for technology and expanded use of technology for additional courses were also listed.

Additional suggestions related to technology involve the improvement of technology services, more teacher training for use of technology, and the need for computer education teachers for expanded technology-based curricula.

Training

Few responders mentioned staff development or teacher training as a positive characteristic of their schools. Typical answers of those who did are: our school provides staff with opportunities to learn, our professional development time, and good inservice training.

"More teacher inservice on technology."
Support Staff

Nearly nine percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* from within the Resources for Schools category are references to teacher training issues—especially the need for more time for professional development, more staff development in learning how to teach integrated units, and more teacher training on technology.

Staff

Resources in schools go beyond bricks and mortar, books and technology to include people, as well. Thirteen percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* from within the Resources for Schools category are about school staff.

Most would add staff—certified staff, teacher aides, teacher interns, reading teachers, at-risk coordinators—to help with students or programs. A few would add incentives to keep staff members from leaving the district.

"Another resource teacher to meet the overflowing demands of increased students."
Teacher

Some who would like to make changes in the current staff said: reduce the number of administrators and use the money to hire more teachers, remove the dead weight in staff, some people need to retire or get out.

"Keep the staff we have around for more than two years."
Teacher

Governance of Schools

Learning Iowa
8

The perceived quality of leadership, policies related to matters of attendance and discipline, consistency, communication, teacher input in decision-making, teacher-freedom, and the implementation of unified goals—these are issues related to the governance of schools.

What about the governance of schools is most valued by Iowans?

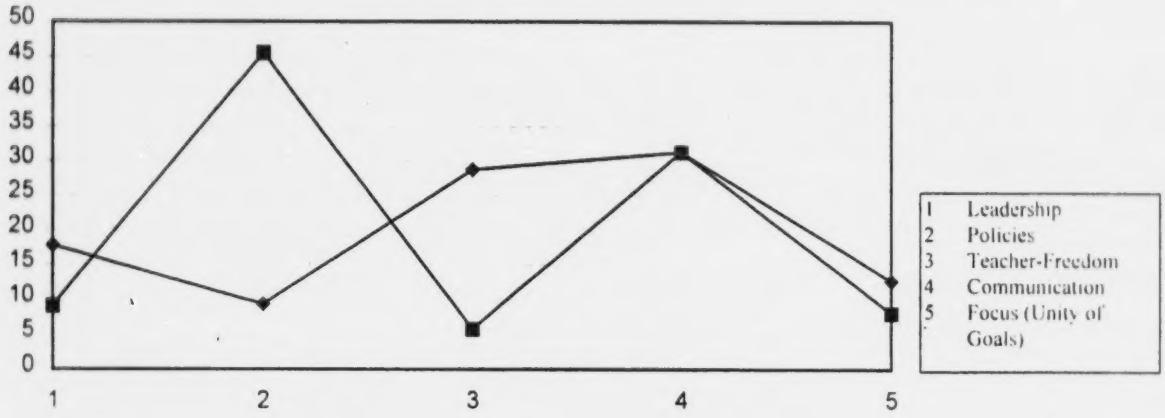
The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What's good about your school?*:

- Communication
- Teacher Freedom

The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What would you change to improve the quality of learning in your school?*:

- Policies
- Communication

Governance of Schools Chart: All Responses



Percentages are of total of responses to the question within this category.

◆ What's good...?
■ What would you change...?

Leadership

Nearly eighteen percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the Governance of Schools category mentioned school leadership.

"Our leadership team has our school focused on the future."
Administrator

"Better leadership—vision driven."
Teacher

"More involvement by the administration in the total educational program."
Teacher

Most listed the word *leadership* with a descriptor such as *good, quality, excellent*. A few stated that the schools' administrators were leading the staff toward specific goals.

About nine percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* related to Governance of Schools listed ideas associated with leadership. One respondent wants the organization and coordination of the central office administration changed.

Other typical responses show a desire for more direction from administrators, better administrative guidance for programs, consistent leadership, more leadership in discipline policies.

Policies

Policies regarding discipline and attendance, especially, and school rules, in general, spark interest in those who deal with the issues daily and families of students who may be affected by enforcement of the rules.

More than nine percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the Governance of Schools category have to do with policies. Responders mentioned improved discipline policies, defined rules, and well-articulated school behavior expectations.

What's Good?
"Our new discipline policy. It spells it out for everyone."
Teacher

More than forty-five percent of all answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* in the Governance of Schools category show discontent with school policies. Some state simply, "We need a better discipline policy." Others say that more help with discipline from administrators would improve learning in their schools.

"We need a centralized discipline structure."
Teacher

"Our school should have stricter policies on students who get in trouble."
Student

Administrative leadership would undoubtedly satisfy those who want a "clear-cut discipline policy" or "more structure in behavior management throughout the school."

Any shift in discipline would need to be stricter or have higher standards, according to the survey. While many want stricter policies, no one listed lowering behavioral expectations.

Attendance policies also come into play in discussions about governance. Survey answers show the desire for stricter attendance policies, better enforcement, and more consistency.

Enforcement is an issue, as well. Answers reflect some need of follow-through with consequences for student behavior—rewarding good behavior and penalties for negative behavior. Not only enforcement—but consistency—is important. Most want students to be treated alike for violating the same policies.

Policies (continued)

Some respondents want the policies to allow removal of students from the educational setting for disruption, lack of respect, or low-motivation. One said bluntly, "We need to get rid of the students we don't want."

"Get rid of the negative students after they have been given a chance to succeed."
Teacher

Looking outside the school, some want more parent support of school policies. One says "change the state laws on discipline."

Teacher Freedom

A teacher is in a professional role when working with students. Whether or not that teacher feels professional in the school is related, in part, to the autonomy given the teacher.

Twenty-nine percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* within the Governance of Schools category included comments about teacher freedom.

"We are allowed the freedom to teach but with support."
Teacher

The answers reveal that teachers place value on "freedom" in teaching—freedom to select resources, to experiment with programs and techniques, to run classrooms according to individual teaching styles, to teach and be creative.

When asked *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?*, the few who made comments about teacher freedom want less paperwork, fewer non-classroom duties, or less administrative work so they can have more freedom to teach.

Communication

Communication drew the largest number of responses—over thirty-one percent—within the Governance in Schools category for the question *What's Good About Your School?*

Some list the word *communication*, but others state communication among teachers, communication among different levels of the school, or communication with community as an asset of the school.

A few praise the ease of communication in their districts because of the one-building district or the small number of school staff.

Communication about decisions is important, too. The opportunities for teacher-input, site-based management, shared decision-making were all listed as good qualities of schools.

"Communication lines are open."
Teacher

"Good communication between parents and the school."
School Volunteer

"Many people have input into the decision-making process."
Parent

Not all of those surveyed think that communication in their schools is strong. In fact, over thirty-one percent of all answers to the *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* question in the Governance of Schools category relate to school communication.

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Communication (continued)

Better or improved communication were common answers. Many would improve communication between administrators and teachers.

"Better communication channels at all levels—central office, all the buildings."
Teacher

Some would have better communication at all levels and with the community. Respondents from districts with several buildings said better communication among buildings is needed.

"Teachers need to be in the information and decision loop."
Teacher

Several commented that teachers need more information and more input. One wants the administration to listen more to input from the staff.

The need to have better communication, in some responses, was related to the idea that teacher collaboration improves learning.

"More communication between teachers about what works and doesn't work in classrooms and how to fix it."
Teacher

Teachers' answers show a desire for more time for K-12 communication, sharing of information within grade levels, and more dialog between grade levels about teaching philosophy.

School's Focus/ Unity of Goals

Nearly thirteen percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* in the Governance of Schools category celebrate the idea of focusing on goals or unity of purpose.

The idea that the staff is "working together for a common goal" is a typical answer. Some say the mission statement and school beliefs give them a sense of common purpose.

"Community and school are united in a desire for viable education."
Community Member

Others say that dialog about standards helps to pull what they do into a "focused effort."

"We are united in our dedication to meet the needs of all students."
Teacher

Several community members wrote answers that fit into this category. One stated that "there is a collaborative effort by all to make this a place of learning for all."

When asked *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?*, eight percent of the answers in the Governance of Schools category show a desire for a better focus or more unity.

"I think teachers and principals should apply the mission statement to every part of the school."
Student

Common goals for staff, students, administrators, and parents would satisfy some.

Others would like all to work together for the good of the students.

More consensus in staff support of curriculum, more consistent and unified belief in curriculum and changes that are needed, and a shared district vision for curriculum are among the ideas given.

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The 'Dug Out' Group

Learning Iowa
9

A Story

The tallest man on the premises—this principal—bends to talk to kids.

We headed toward a room off the media center for a "Dug Out" session. Usually he would have been the listener, but today the time was mine. After introductions, he said, "See you later" and disappeared.

The eight or nine middle schoolers knew the routine. It was their time to talk about the school. Mostly, they talked about why it was a *cool* school to go to.

"We get our own lockers."
"Our teachers are nice."
"They have dances for us."
"Dug Out Time is pretty neat."
"I like BEAR day (Bring-Your-Book-And-Read)"

They were a cross-section of typical students used to communicating in "Dug Out" sessions. They also—as all students there—are participants in the three-year advisor/advisee system, developed to sequentially work with character development, healthy relationships, integrity, and respect.

From the ease with which they talked, their openness in the process, and their transparent connectedness to the school, I'd say the system works.

Learning Iowa
10

Listening to the Community

A Story

The plan is ambitious, I thought, hearing an administrator and a school board member explain the way their district gathers input from the community.

Surveys with reply envelopes enclosed and comment cards sent in utility bills, bank statements, or printed in newspapers "like ads" are only a part of the plan.

They have phone-in radio shows and volunteers to make random telephone surveys.

They have open-to-the-public gatherings on district issues—including one on "level of satisfaction with our schools."

And they do focus groups, involving parents, senior citizens, community leaders, and others, a cross-section of the community. They work at making them communication-friendly, too.

Every comment is kept and made part of the data shared with the school board.

Amazing they do all that, I thought. No—amazing so many districts don't.

School Culture

Learning Iowa
11

The environment for learning, parental and community support, pride in the school, caring for students, student behavior, motivation to learn, diversity, school size, and class sizes---these are issues related to the culture of schools.

What about school culture is most valued by Iowans?

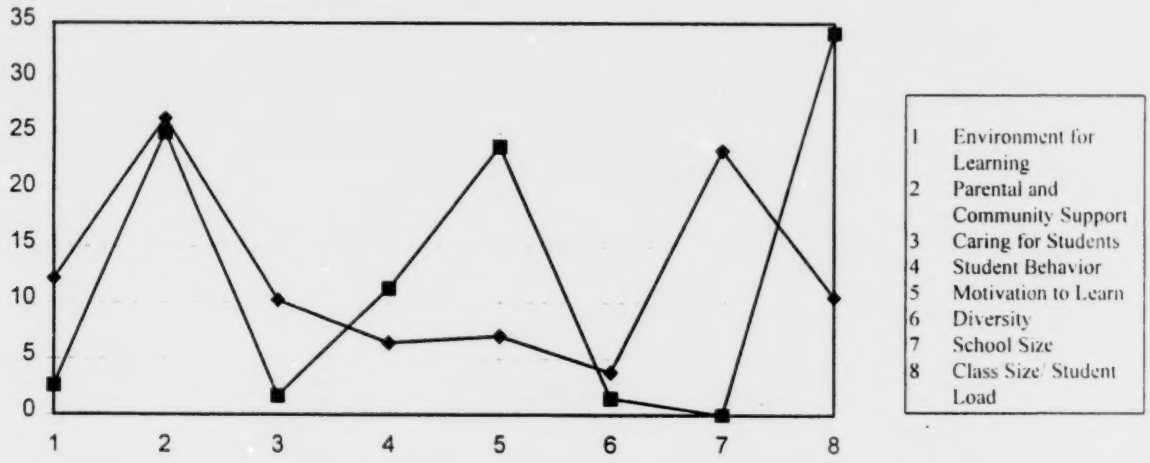
The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What's good about your school?*:

- Parental and Community Support
- Size of School

The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What would you change to improve the quality of learning in your school?*:

- Class sizes/student load
- Parental and Community Support

School Culture Chart: All Responses



Percentages are of total of responses to the question within this category.

◆ What's good...?
■ What would you change...?

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Environment for Learning

More than twelve percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the School Culture category refer to the climate or environment of the school.

"Our school is inviting."
Administrator

"We have art on the walls It's a friendly place."
Teacher

"Good climate in the buildings."
Administrator

Typical comments are: a happy learning environment, a pleasant atmosphere, a safe environment for learning, a relaxed working environment, a positive atmosphere, a community feeling, a comfortable place to teach and learn.

The few answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* related to School Culture said the school needed "a better atmosphere" or "a more accepting, honest, and respectful atmosphere."

Not many, but a few, list "pride" or "good spirit" as a characteristic of their schools. Those who want change made comments like these: more school spirit—something to make the kids proud of the school, a sense of pride by all staff and students, and more pride in facilities, students, athletics, and activities.

Parental and Community Support

When people in schools work hard to achieve learning goals, they like to feel that parents and community members care.

Nearly twenty-seven percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the School Culture category had to do with outsider support. Thirteen percent of those applaud parent support, a near match to the fourteen percent who cited community support.

"Parents care."
Teacher

"Parental involvement in our school."
Administrator

Answers tell about concerned, cooperative parents supportive of the school. They mention parents who are good to work with, who participate, who are willing to be involved.

Community support appears in many comments with some listing the many volunteers in the school, support of bond issues, and community involvement through support of school activities. A few commented that community members give time to work on school committees or school improvement teams.

Twenty-five percent of all answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* in the School Culture category would like increased parental or community support, with over nineteen percent listing parental support and six percent specific to community su, , ort.

The more general answers say they'd like more parents who support the school, greater parent involvement, increased community support, or better community involvement.

More specific answers show a need for more cooperation between parents and the school (teachers and administrators), for more parental interest in education and what the child is learning in school, and for better parenting or home environments that support learning.

Parental and Community Support (continued)

Teachers' comments indicate that the quality of learning would improve if parents would take more responsibility for learning, behaviors, and social skills rather than believing that "the school can do it all."

"Have more parents made aware of what students are learning and encourage students to work hard."
Teacher

"Model a partnership with parents as significant parts of the educational process of their children."
Teacher

Specific ideas also included more parental involvement by helping children with organizational skills, by attendance at parent-teacher conferences, and supportive involvement in disciplinary matters.

Better parent-school and community-school relationships would help, according to individuals who want more positive parental and societal involvement, parents backing the school up—not complaining, and less community-school bickering.

Caring for Students/ Student-Centeredness

Seeing students at the center of education or caring about students emerged in ten percent of responses within the School Culture category for the question *What's Good About Your School?*

"We care about our students."
Teacher

What's good? "The level of caring and concern for students."
Support Staff

"We must become more client-centered in our staff philosophy."
Administrator

Some respondents describe their schools as caring environments where everyone looks out for student needs, places where workers are supportive, student-centered, or where the staff puts kids first.

Other good characteristics of schools are that teachers actively seek what is best for students, work hard to help the students become successful adults, or are interested and aware of student needs.

A few of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* indicate a need for more caring, for teachers who care about children as individuals, and for a shift toward a student-centered philosophy.

Student Behavior

Student behavior provided the focus for six percent of all *What's Good About Your School?* responses that fell within the School Culture category. All answers stated that students in their schools are well-behaved, well-disciplined, or respectful.

"Most students are respectful of authority."
Teacher

"Students should have more respect."
Parent

Twice the percentage—eleven percent—of all answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* in the School Culture category listed behavior-related issues.

Responders want better overall discipline, improved student respect, improved student language, and a reduction of disruptive behavior.

Student Motivation & Accountability

A small number—seven percent—of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* in the School Culture category acknowledge the students' desire to learn in their schools.

"Our students work hard to achieve."
Teacher

The picture that their comments give is that students have pride in what they do, are hard-working, motivated to learn, concerned with their future, and have a desire to achieve.

"Many students are motivated before entering school."
Parent

In contrast, twenty-four percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* within the School Culture category pinpoint student motivation and accountability as influences on learning.

Getting students to come to school eager to learn is important to some, while others want an attitude shift so that students are interested in school and learning.

Student willingness to work harder and to take an active responsibility to be involved in their own learning is a common theme of answers.

"I'd like to see students more in touch with the learning process."
Administrator

A superintendent suggests that students set learning goals and systematically evaluate their progress toward meeting the goals.

Students who are motivated and challenged will get beyond the acceptance of mediocrity to do quality work, according to some. Better work completion—or just doing homework—would satisfy others. A few say better attendance and prioritizing school "before the job" will increase learning.

Diversity

Four percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* in the School Culture category mentioned diversity or variety as a strength, but not all were references to ethnic diversity.

About a third identified variety of age in students, variety of backgrounds, variety of families, diverse population, or "good mix of students."

"Our diversity of population is good—and the opportunity to become aware of other cultures."
Community Member

Diversity in thinking was mentioned as well as diversity of students, staff, curriculum, and programs.

"We have ethnic diversity and harmony among groups."
Teacher

Other answers applaud the ethnic diversity of the school population and the increased knowledge of various cultures. "Accepting children of different cultures" was one respondent's wording.

Only ten individuals referred to a diversity issue when answering *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning*? One, who stated simply "Diversity," didn't communicate what was meant.

Diversity (continued)

Others want to bring more diversity into the school, give students more exposure to the value of diverse cultures, develop tolerance for ethnic differences, and have a more diverse staff. One would "help non-traditional, new families feel part of and responsible for the learning community."

School Size

Twenty-three percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* in the School Culture category referred to school size, whereas no one indicated the need to change school size when answering *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?*

Many explain that it is the *small* size of their schools that is good. One benefit of small size, according to many comments is the lower student to teacher ratio or smaller classes so that teachers get to know both the students and their families well.

"We're small, we're rural, we're traditional."
Administrator

"The small size—you get to know the kids better."
Teacher

Another benefit of small size included in the answers is the sense of community or close-knit relationships within the school. One teacher also commented that the small size "allows a lot of freedom with what I do."

"Our school is the right size—small enough."
School Board Member

"We are small and we know that bigger is not better."
Teacher

The responses about school size communicate a perception that the small size provides students with a quality education. More individual help for students, the "lack of problem students," small-town values, and the "type of students" are typical explanations.

Some see strength of small size in terms of "not too large." Because they're not large, according to some answers, they don't have gangs or other urban problems.

Ten percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* in the School Culture category refer to class size or student to teacher ratio. Class size references were always listed as small. Some responses added that the smaller classes help to get to know students better and give more time for individual attention.

"Smaller class size gives more time with each child."
Teacher

Far more responses—thirty-four percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* within the School Culture category —want smaller class sizes or lighter teaching loads.

"Strong need for smaller classes to provide more interaction between teacher and pupil."
Teacher

Some would lower the maximum number of students per class across all classes, while others would concentrate on early childhood classes. Smaller class sizes for lab classes was also a concern.

"Fewer preps" or different classes for teachers would aid the quality of learning, say some. A few would strive for more equal distribution of work load among staff members.

Learning Iowa

12

Banking Day

A Story

The teachers had sent the children's zipper bank bags home with them the day before. The bags, each printed with the child's name, were no larger than 4" x 6," just the size to hold in a small hand.

Today, most children had brought them with a few coins, a paper bill or two, or a check tucked inside. It was their banking day, held at regular intervals a few weeks apart.

A bank employee from downtown and a school volunteer set up the "bank" in the lobby of the school with a table, a computer, and a box of bank books as basic equipment.

In small groups, the children came. The bankers told the youngest to count out their money if they could and asked them to watch the posting in the bank book.

The bankers supervised the older children as they did their own postings and added new totals.

The children are learning to save money on a regular basis, that money grows when put in a bank, and that members of the community can teach them, too.

People and Relationships

Learning Iowa
13

The students, staff, administrators—specific qualities about them and their relationships--all are vital to Iowa schools.

What about people in schools is most valued by Iowans?

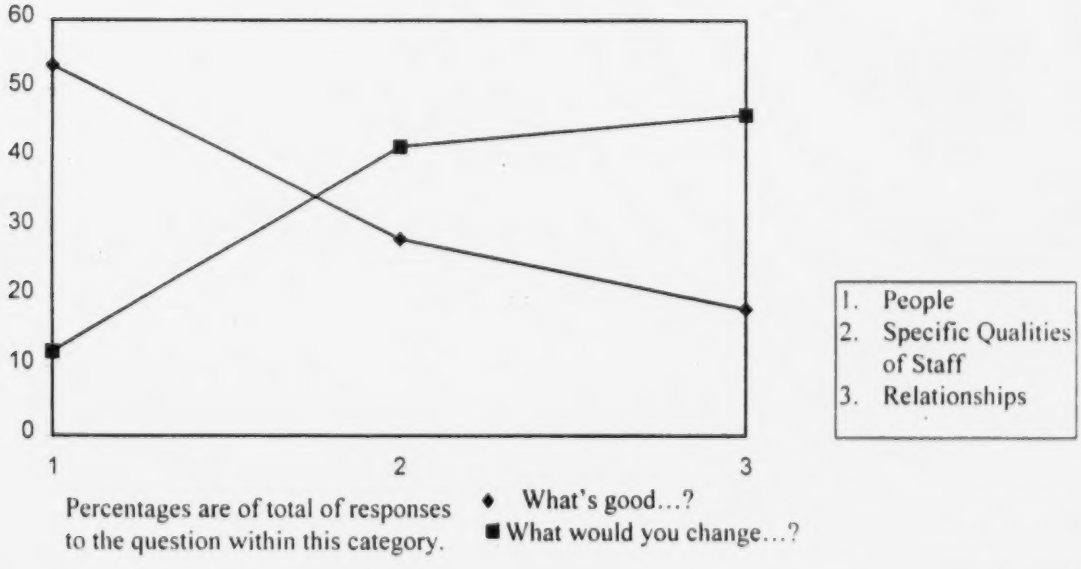
The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What's good about your school?*:

- The people, especially students and teachers
- Specific qualities of staff

The two items most mentioned in this category when asked *What would you change to improve the quality of learning in your school?*:

- Relationships
- Specific qualities of staff

People and Relationships Chart: All Responses



People

What's Good About Your School? One answered, "The people who work there—they care."

"We have many terrific students." Teacher

"Our students are easy to get along with." Support Staff

"We have good students that are polite." Teacher

More than fifty-three percent of all answers that related to people and relationships specifically listed people, students, staff, teachers, or administrators.

People, in general, made up about ten percent of the listings. Students were about thirty-seven percent. Teachers and staff made up more than forty-four percent, and administrators were eight percent.

Comments show that students are perceived as hard working, bright, inquisitive. Adjectives such as good, neat, super, great, terrific, and happy are written before the words *kids*, *children*, *students*, or *student body*. One answer describes students as "good to work with." Another says, "The children are eager and affectionate."

General remarks about teachers show that they are good, nice, friendly, or "top notch." Some responses targeted teachers in the district; others qualified their answers to "some" teachers, or teachers in one building, department, or at one grade level. Many said the staff or teachers they "work with."

"We have good teachers that are always looking for better ways to teach." Teacher

Administrators, not mentioned as frequently, are not forgotten. A few list administration, more specify "the principal," while some responses give "new superintendent" as what's good about the school.

Accompanying comments describe the administration as "easy to work with" or knowledgeable about "what's happening in all areas." One is pleased to have a principal who is "very tech oriented."

When asked *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?*, responders targeted administrators. Most say simply that "new administration" would help or that the school needs a change in administration.

Specific Qualities of Staff

More than twenty-eight percent of all answers to *What's Good About Your School?* in the people and relationships category list specific qualities of the staff.

"What's good? The staff—caring, intelligent, and selfless." Community Member

"I work with excellent professionals."--Teacher

"The two wonderful teachers that my son has had." --Parent

When combined with the more general "People" sub-category, the responses that address people in schools total nearly eighty-two percent. When asked about what's good in their schools, many individuals first thoughts are of the people in schools and their qualities.

What are the qualities that people notice? Teachers, they say, are hard-working, dedicated, and "willing to go the extra mile."

Specific Qualities of Staff (continued)

From the responses one gets a picture of conscientious teachers with a strong work ethic who will go to every effort to help students learn. Other comments show that teachers are nurturing and empathetic, caring about students' needs.

Some describe the school staff as enthusiastic, energetic, and even passionate about teaching. A few gave special notice to attitude, described as upbeat, positive, or forward-looking. One mentioned the staff's "good attitude toward education."

"The staff takes great pride in what it does and puts much energy into it."
Teacher

Several responders take pride in teachers who are stable, experienced, professional, well-informed, and more than competent. Many comments show a perception that teachers are committed to do what is best for students and best for learning.

"The school, the teachers, are not afraid of change."
Community Member

The theme of change surfaced as staff members were described as progressive, innovative, and not afraid of change. The teachers are "up-to-date on ideas, always trying to improve," according to one answer. One teacher pinpointed her school's strength as "our ability to allow change for the future—to take risks."

Although respondents value good qualities of people in schools, over forty-one percent of answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* directly related to people and relationships see needed changes in people.

"I'd want teachers who are happy to be working with students."
Support Staff

"We need more people willing to get out of their rut and extend themselves to become better teachers."
Teacher

Those who wish to change people want teachers to be more professional and to have positive attitudes. They would like more commitment to excellence and increased accountability. A more unified staff or, as so many noted, better "team effort" in working toward school goals or for good education emerged as important.

Others see flexibility and the ability to change as important. Teacher willingness to change, more creativity, more variety, a change in style of teaching and testing are common responses. One teacher would like the staff to be more "visionary."

The need for all staff members to be part of the changes in the school surfaced as well. Responders want all teachers be open-minded, to take some risks, to accept change, and cooperate as part of the change process.

Relationships

Of the responses within the people and relationships category, more than eighteen percent of the answers to *What's Good About Your School?* are about relationships in the school. In contrast, forty-six percent would change school relationships to improve the quality of learning.

"In our school teachers and administrators work as a team."
Teacher

Of those who view the relationships in their schools as positive, nearly fifteen percent commented about the relationship between teachers and administrators. Trust and support from a principal or the district administration is important, according to the responses.

Relationships

Some express that feelings of "being needed and useful" come from a principal or superintendent. A few teachers remark that it is good to work with administrators as a team.

What to Change?
"Administrative attitude needs an adjustment."
Teacher

Forty-three percent of those who see a need for a change in the relationships in their school targeted relationships with the administration. Comments show that teachers want administrators who care about everyone, treat people fairly and with respect, and attend the activities.

Frequent answers show a need for administrators to give more encouragement and display a positive attitude. Some state directly, "administration does not work with teachers."

Staff relationships earned the highest praise among those who view the relationships in their schools as positive—over seventy-six percent. Responses show that strong support from fellow teachers, sometimes described as the helpfulness of colleagues, is important to the teaching staff.

The idea of working well together, a feeling of camaraderie, and a sense of cohesion while working toward the same goals echo through the comments, reinforcing the importance of supportive staff relationships. Several answers identify the acceptance of new faculty members as good about their schools.

"We get along well with one another."
Teacher

"Everyone makes me feel welcome and needed."
Teacher

For some, however, good staff relationships are not a reality. Forty-seven percent of those who see a need for a change in the relationships in their school want to improve staff relationships.

"I'd change to all staff working together as a true community."
Teacher

Responses show that some wish for more cooperation, for a sense of collegiality, or for "more community among staff."

"Staff to be able to truly get along, be able to work together."
Teacher

Others want more interdepartmental cooperation, more support across grade levels, a better working relationship with staff in other buildings in the district.

Where are the students in the picture of school relationships? More than eight percent of the positive comments about school relationships included students. Responses verified that teachers and students "get along," seem to care about each other, and respect and try to understand one another. One teacher said, "The kids are always fun."

A sense that better relationships with students might improve the quality of learning came out of ten percent of the answers to *What Would You Change to Improve the Quality of Learning?* directly related to relationships in schools. Common themes were better teacher-student communication and mutual respect.

One teacher wants more time to "build relationships with the students." Others see teachers' attitudes as an obstacle to better relationships with students.

"More kid-friendly teachers."
Teacher

But—It's Not a School Day

Learning Iowa
14

A Story

But—it's not a school day, I thought, as student after student emerged from cars in the high school parking lot.

My invitation to lead a staff development session on a teacher-inservice day was not unusual. Nor was the invitation to join the teaching staff for lunch.

The surprise, however, was that so many students were there—and that they had brought the food.

This was no franchise pizza delivery or deli-catered lunch. It was oven-fried chicken, home-cooked casseroles, potato salads, and just out-of-the-oven desserts.

"It's a student council project," one of the students explained. "We see it as a way to show appreciation to the teachers."

"But it's not a school day?"

"We don't care," she said. "This is where we want to be. We like to be with each other, and we like the teachers, too."

Learning Iowa
15

The Multi-age Class

A Story

The Level I students—ages five and six—had been coached in communication skills. The lesson stressed focused listening. The teacher wanted the children to listen so they could respond on topic to what is said.

It was time to practice the skill—interview style.

The interviewers, Level IV Students, arrived carrying questions. Partnerships were made and soon the eleven/twelve year olds queried according to plan. "What is your whole name?...How many people are in your family?...Do you have any pets?..."

The older students had been coached, too, so used eye contact while asking and listening. They probed for detail, conscientiously recording the answers with accuracy—one of the standards for the task.

Later, the written answers would emerge as content for questions in another listening practice, disguised as a "Who Am I?" game.

School Improvement

Learning Iowa 16

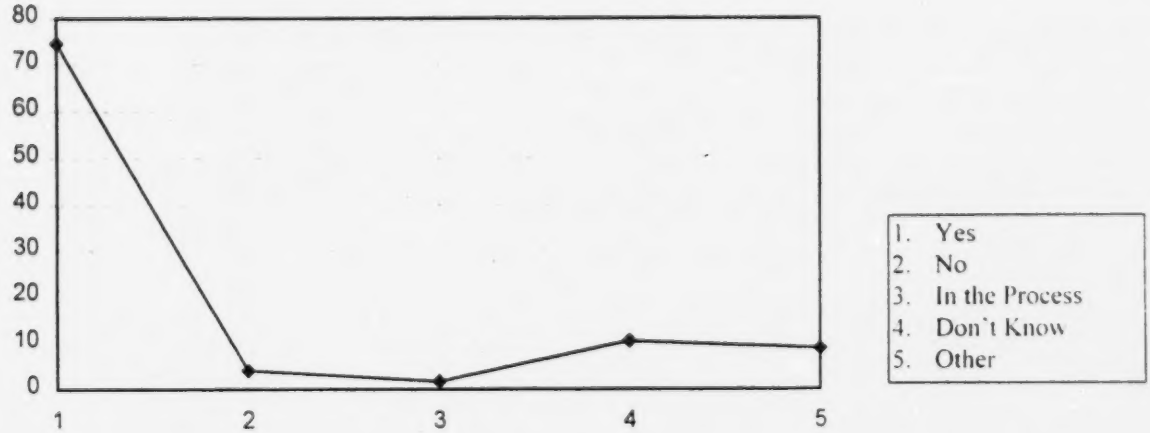
To move forward in a changing world school districts face the challenges of self-examination, goal-setting for improvement, and implementation of the goals.

The question: Does your school have a school improvement plan?

The answers:

- Yes (75%)
- No (4%)
- In the Process (2%)
- Don't Know (10%)
- Other (9%)

School Improvement Plan Chart: All Responses



Percentages are of total of responses to the question from all individuals surveyed.

School Improvement

When asked *Does your school have a school improvement plan?*, a community member replied, "Yes, don't they all?"

Ideally, every school district would have a school improvement plan, but ten percent of those surveyed said they didn't know about one. Four percent responded with a firm, "No."

Whether or not someone has knowledge of a school improvement plan may be related more to the number of stakeholders involved in the process of planning for improvement and the communication channels than to the existence of a strategic plan.

Vague Knowledge of Plan

"I guess we have one, but I know little."
Teacher

"I'm not sure if we have a plan, but I know the school is always trying to make improvements in all areas of education."
Teacher

"Probably on paper—but I'm not sure what it is."
Teacher

The answer, "sort of," summarizes some of the comments made when asked *Does your school have a school improvement plan?*

Some respondents didn't really know about a plan but assumed the school had one because of visible improvements or knowledge of efforts to "get better" every year.

Many who answered "yes" commented that they knew very little or nothing about the plan, saying it was "too abstract" or "not long term" or "not well known."

In more than several minds, the School Improvement Plan is a piece of paper or list. Remarks describe the Plan as "our list of goals" or tell about the "11 x 17 inch sheet of paper with goals." Others describe the Plan as "the paper on the wall in the office" or "what the superintendent reads to us every year."

The paper plan doesn't exist in action in some districts. Some comments show a lack of time or plans to implement the ideas. "I know we work at designing ideas for improvement," stated one teacher, "but the final step never seems to take place."

Others say the school has a plan that is accessible when they want to find out about it. The resources—either people more involved or paper copies—are available if someone needs information.

One teacher said, "It is available when I have time to consume it."

"Each building has one. I've read them all and am impressed by the focus on student achievement."
Administrator

"No clue when it will get from paper to action."
Teacher

"Details given on charts. I know what's expected of me."
Teacher

A few responded that they had partial knowledge of a School Improvement Plan, saying that they knew some of the programs or the "pieces that apply to me."

One support staff member suggests that the School Improvement Plan is the "suggestion box in the teachers' lounge."

Plan in Progress

Some districts have plans in the beginning stages, according to one group of answers. "We're making one," stated one teacher, while others gave more specifics. In some schools the development of a plan may be creating standards for all areas. In others it may be working on long-term goals or forming study groups.

"Study groups and inservice sessions address it, but it's in its infancy."
Teacher

Study groups or committees are common to many schools' processes. Many teachers who knew about school improvement said they had worked on committees as part of the process.

"Yes. There is a committee."
Teacher

Typical responses include: I helped by sitting on the committee, I am on the Leadership Team—helped write the Strategic Plan, and we have all been divided into committees.

"We're in committees and meet often. All is going well."
Teacher

Committee involvement is not limited to teachers. Others who mentioned that they were involved on school improvement teams included parents, community members, school volunteers, and members of the school support staff. One parent was a "parent facilitator of the SIP [School Improvement Planning] Team" at an elementary school for several years.

Some community members know about committees made up of people in the community to advise the school—perhaps the same type of committee described by a parent as "working to improve the quality of education and communication."

Teachers and administrators tell about curriculum committees involved in the school improvement process. One administrator said "our curriculum committees work together every year to improve the quality of education."

For a support staff member who is "unaware of the overall goal for the school system," school improvement takes place in "curriculum meetings for departments."

"We have been involved in groups in various areas. This has been an ongoing project for two years involving classes and workshops."
Teacher

The on-going nature of school improvement emerged in comments that tell of multiple meetings over several years. The meetings, according to the responses, gather input through discussions about how to improve or try new ideas, deciding what's important, and formulating goals for the whole school.

A number of school districts use inservice time for some school improvement planning. Time may be used for work on goals by grade level or training related to the improvement focus. One school uses inservice time to discuss "successes and failures in meeting the goals."

One teacher described the school improvement process as "setting dates on the calendar and trying to meet state guidelines."

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Results of the Planning

Is there more than focused dialog in the school improvement process? Some say an enthusiastic "yes!"

Results include established goals to improve student learning, increased sharing of information that translates into curricular changes, a school-wide focus for improvement for all.

"We have a vision statement, action plans, inservice training, and a coordination team to help."
Teacher

Several school districts have accomplished the formulation of a clearly-defined vision for K-12 education with input from teachers, parents, and community members, according to survey responses.

"We have goals that are presented to a committee for review and board approval."
Teacher

Goals are a centerpiece of school improvement plans in many school districts. Teachers speak of specific issues that have been translated into school improvement goals or say they are working toward goals started last year.

Others tell of upgrading past goals or redefining goals specific to different areas. One person's comments describe the School Improvement Plan as "new 'Goals for School Improvement' formulated by the community."

Some describe the purpose of the goals: to focus on learning, to improve the quality of education for all, to develop more pride and higher teaching standards, or to bring success for all students.

For others, the School Improvement Plan is a strategic plan to implement goals. One teacher tells about school improvement as "very carefully planned. Everything is on a cycle with goals, etc." Some responses referred to five-year plans or short-term vs. long-term plans.

One vehicle for improvement is curriculum. Schools target new areas each year, according to survey responses, or have a "step-by-step plan for improvement."

"We are continually looking at areas and trying to improve."
Teacher

Staff Development, another vehicle for school improvement, may involve ongoing inservice education with specific goals each year. The overall goals of improving "teacher quality" or updating to "keep current" may be tied to specific classroom goals.

Responses to the survey indicate that some districts send staff members to training outside the district and ask them to teach their colleagues when they return.

"We're involved in a 3-year 'Dimensions in Learning' staff development."
Teacher

Other districts have sequenced staff development to involve a training course over a period of time—several sessions or several years.

"We worked on this extensively for NCA."
Teacher

The North Central Accreditation (NCA) process is a third vehicle for school improvement. The NCA goal-setting and evaluation procedures give schools a framework for improvement. When asked about a school improvement plan, some identified it as the ongoing NCA planning.

Results of the Planning (continued)

Just what do schools hope to improve? The responses reveal a multitude of ideas.

School districts may be working on planning a new building, physical plant improvements, providing child care before and after school, continuous staff development, or improved communication.

"Our emphasis is on curriculum, instruction, and assessment."
Teacher

Cognitive coaching, improvement of teaching techniques, setting new standards at all curriculum levels, or creating developmentally appropriate benchmarks are examples of other districts' school improvement plans.

"We want our students to learn with enthusiasm, treat people with respect, and do their very best work and learning."
Teacher

A school may be working toward becoming a Quality School, toward adoption of block scheduling, toward an improved school climate, toward better community involvement.

"We are focusing on the area of technology—to improve the use and condition of technology.
Teacher

Technology, according to the survey results, is the focus in many schools. For some it is a plan to equip the classrooms with up-to-date computers. Others see teacher technology training and better use of technology for learning as important.

Other schools want to make all learning apply to the real world, to develop alternative assessments, to list detailed outcomes for each teaching area.

Increased student responsibility, the adoption of a uniform discipline system, job improvement targets, an improved report card, or professional portfolios are plans for improvement in some Iowa districts. One school's focus is language arts "with the goal of achieving reading growth of one year."

Who owns the School Improvement Plan?

While many of the answers to the question about school improvement used words like *we* and *our* to tell about their schools' situations, a significant number of respondents show little ownership in their districts' school improvement process.

"They meet to set goals and try to find ways to meet those goals."
Parent

"I've read it but have no input," was one teacher's comment. Another said, "I know little about it and feel no ownership whatsoever."

"There are committees—a bunch of them—but I don't really know what direction or what they are doing."
Teacher

Some responses show an awareness that people are working on school improvement without communicating to others what is happening. "Those people involved don't pass along the information," said a teacher. "School improvement is in the board goals," commented another, "I know little except it has to do with computers."

"The plan and process seem to be driven by a few individuals in the district."
Community Member

Some perceive that administrators are more strongly tied to school improvement plans than others. Goals are established by the administration, some believe, or the "superintendent dictates." One teacher recalled, "Our principal spoke about it last spring, but I can't remember details."

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What the Critics are Saying About School Improvement

The question *Does your school have a school improvement plan?* prompted some who responded to give opinions about the plan or the process in their school districts.

"I expect to see good things come of this."
Parent

A few are positive, saying that it's a good plan, involves "many facets that need looked into", or showing hope about the outcomes.

Others are critical about the focus of improvements. A teacher said, "The plan is not where it needs to be," explaining that staff development in that school isn't practical for classroom change.

Both parent and teacher comments show the perception that the SIP teams are trying to make changes that aren't needed.

A parent asserts that the process wastes time. "My impression of the quality improvement program so far is that they spend a lot of time coming up with goals that are common sense, and they aren't really coming up with anything new."

"Some parts [of the school improvement process] work: some don't."
Teacher

Others are critical of the process. A parent who had been on a planning team said the involvement of too many stakeholders didn't always work because "many came to complain, few to work for improvement."

"We never get time to make the improvements because we are always in meetings"
Teacher

A comment from a teacher showed frustration that the process involved "a little bit of talk about a lot of different things but no in-depth about any certain thing."

A support staff member echoed a similar concern: "they don't seem to move toward the same vision together."

The desire to accomplish something concrete emerged in the comments as well. "Many of the focus groups waste time on the *whys* and discuss more philosophical questions rather than school improvement," observed a parent.

The idea that school improvement is a lot of discussion with little follow through came out in several teachers' comments. "Seems like you're always working, and you wonder if things are being done," said one.

Another remarked that meetings take time away from the implementation of changes. One teacher bluntly stated, "School improvement is long and boring."

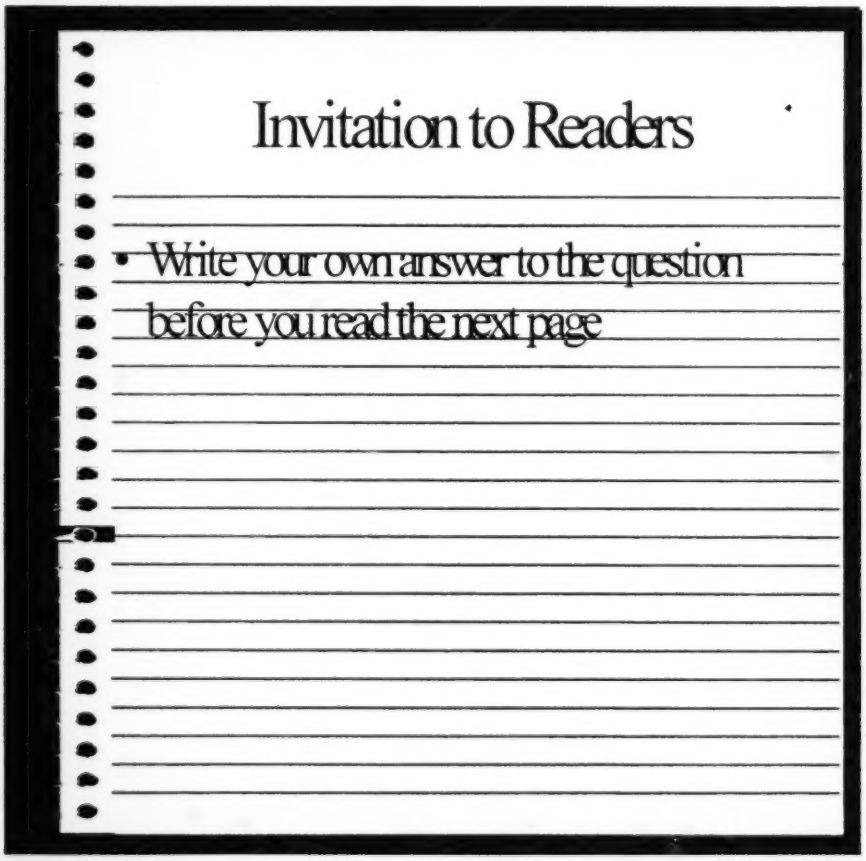
Learning Matters

Learning Iowa
17

Any thoughtful discussion about schools must ultimately center on learning. Indeed, all decisions about how schools are organized, the quality of education offered, the use of resources, and how a school is governed arise from how one defines learning. A school's culture as well as the people and the relationships within the school shapes the value the school places on learning.

The answers to the question *How do we know when students learn?* came from a small sampling of thirty-some educators—both administrators and teachers—in several settings. The answers shown on the next page are composites of written responses to the question and parts of journal entries written as a record of conversations.

The question: How do we know when students learn?



The question: How do we know when students learn?

By Observation	We "catch students" learning as we read their body language or see "the light come into the eyes." Sometimes it's a "Wow—I get it!" moment. We observe the child reacting in a changed manner from earlier—it may be that the child is more engaged, more enthusiastic, more understanding. One assumes that if the student is actively involved, then learning is happening.
By checking for understanding	Routine checks to monitor students' understanding give evidence of learning. The check is an opportunity for the student to "tell, show, demonstrate some understanding of the concept." Using pre- and post-tests gives a picture of growth.
By accumulating records	Documenting test scores, rubric results, and assignment records create a picture of performance and achievement. A portfolio may be a collection of evidence of learning.
By collection of data	The number of office referrals, tardies, or absences may be related to learning. Lower numbers signal that students are more engaged in learning activities.
By test scores	Standardized test scores "tend to measure what students know or can do in comparison with the class" a year before.
By the student's completion of tasks	Completion of an assigned task according to pre-set standards demonstrates learning. Students have learned when assessments show that standards and goals have been met.
By student's success teaching someone else	Teaching someone else involves translating new concepts or knowledge into one's own language to "articulate metacognitively" to another. We know a student has learned if s/he can teach someone else the "learning."
By student's success applying learning to a new situation	Learning has occurred if a student uses knowledge by applying it into another area of life. We know students have learned when they "make connections between classroom practice and real-life situations." Those connections would include the application of problem-solving and decision making to real life."
By evidence that the student wants to learn more	The "internal motivation to learn more" or the active pursuit of "preparation for life-long activities" takes new understandings beyond short-term learning.
By listening as the students tell us	Students entries in reflective journals and learning conferences between students and teachers yield important student perceptions of their own learning.

Thoughts About Measuring Learning

A Discussion Starter

- We know students learn when they can show us what they know by "doing" what they've learned. It is our task as teachers to know how they come to know, to give them time and opportunity to know, and finally to make sure they have everything necessary (tools, methods, mediums, expectations, etc.) to show by "doing."—A teacher
- I want my students to judge their own work and their progress against quality criteria they understand and even helped create and then make plans for how to improve the quality of their own work.—A teacher
- Teachers see learning and achievement as observations in the classroom or through knowing the child and seeing growth. Many administrators seem to think that the only valid evidence of learning is through data collection, usually standardized test results. A lot of teachers don't see standardized tests as related to learning in the classroom. —A journal entry
- The problem with standardized tests is getting the kids to take them seriously.—A superintendent
- The problem with those tests is that I don't know any of the answers. I try for the first couple of pages, but I don't like having to keep guessing—so I just fill in the circles and quit.—A student
- Our eventual assessment of student achievement related to our new standards and benchmarks may produce learning measurements that bring classroom and administrative data collection together.—A journal entry
- We too often measure a school's success not by the added value it brings to the students it gets but rather who the students are in the first place.—Quotation from a book review (*On the Outside Looking In* by Cristina Rathbone)
- Any assessment that does not further the learning process, that is not seen as a new beginning instead of "the end," that is not viewed by the student as a help instead of a fear or obstacle, that does not open up new vistas and opportunities for the child, is nothing more, to me, than a waste of time.—A teacher
- What we hold up as evidence of learning becomes the symbol of learning itself. If we praise high scores from tests which call for recitation of facts, the quest to learn will narrow itself to improving the retention of information. If we praise high scores on tests of computation skills, schools will accelerate in that direction but lose ground in other skill areas. If we use a variety of authentic assessments, we will encourage well-balanced learning.—A journal entry

Learning Iowa
18

The Video Project

A Story

The boys seemed intent on getting the exact wording. One would say something aloud; the other would write. Together they reread it with what was written just before.

"No, it just doesn't flow," one said. "We gotta think of a better way."

I entered then, sorry to tell them that I had been told to use the room for a video-taping.

"Oh, we can leave," one said, stacking up their papers.

"What's your project?" I asked.

"This is a script we've been writing. We're doing a video documentary during our study halls," was the answer.

"On space aliens," said his partner. "We're about ready to film the end."

"Is this project for a class?" seemed a natural next question.

"Part of it was—last year in seventh grade. We did the first part. Then we found more information and, well, we just wanted to make it better."

"We know how to do more now, too," the other boy explained. "We got some neat special effects."

"Yeah, the video for class was pretty lame compared to this one."

Revisiting the Questions

Learning Iowa
19

Education is universal. I have never met anyone over the age of five who hasn't gone to school or been home-schooled. Education is one of the measures of who we are—both individually and collectively. Iowans and the State of Iowa look to education as both their center of gravity and their propulsion toward change. We want education to anchor us and to lift us, simultaneously.

It seems appropriate after this year as Ambassador for Education that I revisit the same questions I've been asking school-to-school, town-to-town. My answers, however, take a broader look.

What's good about Iowa's schools?

The *learning*—students are learning, people who work in schools are learning, the 'schools' are learning—and the *autonomy* given to schools to construct their own learning.

While on the road this year, I stayed a night with a retired teacher-couple who had built their dream house for retirement. They planned and built a log structure that amazes all who see it. Not only is it beautiful, spacious, personalized to their family-centered life-style—it is theirs. They and their sons built it themselves, log by log.

I have former students who are building dreams, too, in professions where they contribute to the hopes of our society. They are aerospace engineers designing components for space shuttles or space stations.

They are also chemical engineers building pharmaceutical products or lawyers constructing arguments based on investigative research. Some are employees of the State Department engineering foreign policy or foreign trade agreements.

In school-after-school I saw teachers and administrators as the builders of systems, or resources, or curriculum, or programs, or relationships.

On one level, it is the teachers working directly with students who build skills, confidence, new understandings, maturity, and dreams.

On another level, it is the staff who together gain skills, confidence, new understandings, and maturity to move the school forward.

A few districts are successfully working at a third level in genuine collaboration with the community so that they collectively gain skills, confidence, new understandings, and maturity to work together toward their vision for education.

Like the building of the log house—which took skills, confidence, new understandings, and maturity, too—schools in Iowa have the promise of knowing that what they build is theirs.

That ownership—the gift of autonomy—increases the potential for success.

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What would you change to improve the quality of learning?

I would invest more time and training in how people communicate.

Last November, as a guest of the Iowa Association of School Board's Convention, I attended a session about reporting student achievement data to the public. During the questioning period, someone asked, "Who should do the communicating—the superintendent or someone else?" The presenter's answer, "Whoever has credibility in your school district," brought wall-rocking laughter, meaning, I suppose, that each person was thinking that no one had credibility. Someone then quipped, "Maybe the custodian."

A teacher's personality, people in the school, relationships—all seem to be connected to what people think about schools. Support for or against school policies, school programs, teaching practices, bond issues, and change may have more to do with the 'people factor' than factual information.

It isn't speech training but communications training that would make the difference. Teachers need to know how to work with students to build a community of learners with each class. Teachers and administrators need skills training to improve collaboration, group facilitation, listening, and consensus building.

Anyone involved in planning for school improvement would benefit by learning communication strategies to effect change—particularly those which involve shifts in behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, or values.

Communications, often seen as a soft skill, is worthy of more attention. Good leadership depends on effective communication skills. In an era of committee work and planning teams, leaders rely on others to communicate well, too.

Poor communication clogs the change process and slows what we can do to upgrade the learning in our schools. Improving the way people communicate signals the importance of human resources in the process of change and builds credibility for both the process and the individuals involved in the process.

What about a School Improvement Plan?

My perception of Iowans, in general, is that we get up in the morning intent on improving the world. We are not mere survivalists—we want to make the world a better place.

The people in Iowa's schools seem intent on improving the schools. Some in small steps, others in leaps, have seen results of their work. Many are just learning how.

But we must be careful.

If we over-analyze the way we teach, test, organize the day or year, or run the school, we risk undermining our confidence and losing satisfaction of what we are and do. We then seek security and find it in what we can count on—people and relationships. We hold more tightly to them—our center of gravity—and delay our plans or compromise our vision.

Understanding the creative tension between the anchor and the launching device is a first step toward effecting change. Articulating that concept to those we work with is the second step.

Without these steps, we will exist—even survive—but we won't improve the world.

Appendix
Ambassador Schedule

Learning Iowa
20

Where have I been and what have I done as Ambassador?

- Been in school buildings in 88 districts in 67 counties
- Presented 46 staff development sessions for classroom teachers
- Worked with students in teacher preparation programs on 8 campuses
- Taught 21 college education classes; presenter for 3 evening campus forums
- Facilitated 13 community-educator groups in "Sharing Our Strengths" sessions
- Presented 12 club talks
- Presented 5 student assemblies
- Presented 98 "Reach for the Stars" sessions to elementary students
- Speaker/guest for 1 PTA meeting, for 1 National Honor Society Induction, for 1 district's teacher recognition and retirement banquet, for Pella Window Corporation's Technology Award Banquet
- Presenter to 2 AEA's meetings for superintendents
- Panel member for County Youth, Crime, and Violence Forum; focus group leader for SATUCI school project
- Worked as educator-resource for department meetings in 2 school districts
- Worked as member of 1 NCA Evaluation Team, 2 Department of Ed College Evaluation Teams, 1 Department of Ed School Improvement/Accreditation Team
- Made classroom visits at all levels K-12
- Presenter at ISEA Student Fall Workshop, IEREA Conference, MISTL held at Hampton-Dumont, MISTL held at Howard-Winneshiek, English as a Second Language/Bilingual and Refugee Concerns Conference, State Tech Prep Conference, ASCD National Assessment Consortium Conference, Girls State
- Guest at F.I.N.E. and IASB Conferences
- Guest critic/judge at IHSSA All State Individual Events Festival
- Participant in Milken Conference
- Participant in ICN Dialog about teacher preparation with Higher Education
- Gathered answers to three questions about schools from 2815 individuals who work or reside in 159 school districts
- Interviewed and video-taped 150 individuals who work or reside in 50 school districts (using same three questions about schools)

Other education-related experiences during the year (supported by other groups):

- *Two-week trip to Russia to work with teachers on classroom strategies for developing independent thinking skills*
- *Three-day trip to Washington DC as part of delegation from home community for reciprocal exchange of information with government officials related to educational needs in Marshalltown*

My Calendar of Events as Iowa Teacher of the Year and Iowa's Ambassador for Education

April 3, 1997
ISEA Delegate Assembly Speech
"Making Connections"
Ames

April 9, 1997
Introduced to both houses of Iowa Legislature
Des Moines

April 9, 1997
ITOY Governor's Luncheon
Speech
Des Moines

April 16-18, 1997
NTOY Events in Washington
Guest at The White House
Washington DC

May 3, 1997
Kickoff Teacher Appreciation
Speech: "Celebrating Teaching & Learning"
State Capitol Building
Des Moines

May 10, 1997
Guest at F.I.N.E. Awards
Terrace Hill, Des Moines

May 15, 1997
Marshalltown Optimist Club Youth Appreciation Week Speech:
"Connections and Caring"
Marshalltown

May 28, 1997
School-to-Work Banquet
Speech: "Prep for Lifework for all students"
Marshalltown

May 29, 1997
Marshalltown Educ Association
Spring Recognition Tea
"Celebrating Good Teaching"
Marshalltown

June 14, 1997
Delta Kappa Gamma
State Conference
"Sharing Strengths"
Amanas

June 16-17, 1997
ISEA MISTL Cadre Meeting
Participant in Training:
Brain Research
Des Moines

June 25, 1997
ITOY Reception
Guest of Honor
Chamber of Commerce, MCSD
Marshalltown

July 1, 1997
Department of Education Planning
Conference
Des Moines

July 11, 1997
Corn Carnival Parade
Ride in Convertible
Gladbrook

July 24-Aug 3, 1997 International
Space Camp 1997 Participant
Huntsville, Alabama

August 11, 1997
Noon Lions Club
"Sharing our Strengths"
Marshalltown

August 13, 1997
ISEA Uniserve Unit I Leadership
"Classroom Community"
Spencer

August 15, 1997
Grundy Center Staff
"Reaching Students"
Grundy Center

August 15, 1997
AEA 7 Class
"Classroom Climate"
Hawkeye Community College
Waterloo

August 18, 1997
Sigourney Staff
"Classroom Community"
Sigourney

August 18, 1997
Keota Staff
"Classroom Community"
Keota

August 19, 1997
Keokuk Staff
"Assessment"
Keokuk

August 20, 1997
Turkey Valley Staff
"Classroom Community"
Jackson Junction

August 21, 1997
Pella Staff
"Classroom Community"
Pella

August 21, 1997
Lynnville Sully Staff
"Reaching Students"
Sully

August 25, 1997
Aplington-Parkersburg Schools
Community/School Breakfast
"Importance of Community"
Aplington Veterans Bldg

August 26, 1997
Davis County Schools Staff
"Classroom Community"
Bloomfield

August 27, 1997
Essex Comm Schools
Informal conversation
with faculty
"Reach for the Stars"
Essex

August 27, 1997
Fremont-Mills Schools
Lunch with faculty
"Reach for the Stars"
Tabor

August 27, 1997
Nishna Valley Schools
Staff Development:
"Classroom Community"
West of Red Oak in country

August 28, 1997
South Page Comm Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
College Springs

August 28, 1997
Villisca Comm Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
Staff Development:
"Classroom Community"
Villisca

August 29, 1997
Farragut Comm Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
Farragut

September 3, 1997
Evening Lions Club
"Teacher of the Year Story"
Marshalltown

September 5, 1997
Iowa Public Television
Tour and meetings
Johnston

September 8, 1997
Special Ed Science Class
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown HS

September 10, 1997
Paton-Churdan Elementary
"Reach for the Stars"
Paton

September 10, 1997
Paton-Churdan
"Reaching students"
Churdan

September 11, 1997
Jefferson-Scranton Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
Scranton

September 16, 1997
Iowa State University
Education classes & reception
Ames

September 16, 1997
AAUW Meeting
"Importance of Lifelong Learning"
Marshalltown

September 17, 1997
Twin Cedars Staff
"Reaching Students"
Bussey

September 18, 1997
Wilton High School
Academic Awards Assembly
& Staff Development
"Classroom Community"
Wilton

September 19, 1997
Wilton Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Wilton

September 23, 1997
Marshalltown Rotary Club
"Musings about Education"
Marshalltown

September 26, 1997
Heartland AEA Western
Consortium
" Reaching Students"
Manning

September 27, 1997
Westmar College Awards Banquet
Speech and Workshop
Le Mars

September 29-30, 1997
Simpson College
Speech & Workshops in Classes
Evening Forum for Public
Indianola

October 1, 1997
North Tama School District
"Reach for the Stars"
Traer

October 1, 1997
Dysart Area Event for Teachers,
Administrators, PTA, and
Community sponsored by Delta
Kappa Gamma
" Sharing Strengths"
Dysart

October 2, 1997
Department of Education Meeting
with Susan Fischer
Des Moines

October 4, 1997
Soroptomists District Mtg.
"Community & Education"
Des Moines

October 5-18, 1997
US/Russia/Ukraine TEA Cadre
Khaborovsk Territory, Russia

October 24, 1997
AEA 15 Inservice
1 "Technical Communications"
2 "Reaching Students"
Ottumwa

October 25, 1997
Vinton AAUW Meeting
"Sharing Our Strengths"
Vinton

October 27, 1997
Rogers Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

October 28, 1997
Talented & Gifted Class
"Russia: Schools & Students"
Marshalltown HS

October 28, 1997
Anson Middle School
"Russia: Schools & Students"
Marshalltown

October 29, 1997
East High School
Met with Ruth Ann Gaines
Des Moines

October 29, 1997
Lunch with Joen Rottler
Star Schools Project
Ankeny

October 29, 1997
Ankeny High School
Tech. Communications
Meeting with Linda Rasmussen
Ankeny

October 30, 1997
F.I.N.E. Conference Guest
Des Moines

November 3, 1997
Student ISEA Meeting
"Going Beyond Teaching"
University of Iowa, Iowa City

November 4, 1997
Wickham Elementary
Classroom visits
Iowa City

November 4, 1997
Harlan Elementary
Classroom visits
Mt. Pleasant

November 4, 1997
Iowa Wesleyan College
Student Teaching Seminar
"Reaching Students"
Mt. Pleasant

November 5-6, 1997
Milken Conference
Panel Member & Group Facilitator
Des Moines

November 7, 1997
Tom Urban Award Dinner Guest of
F.I.N.E.
Embassy Club, Des Moines

November 10, 1997
Evening Lions Club
Invite-An-Educator Night
"Sharing Our Strengths"
Kellogg

November 11, 1997
Regional Telecommunications
Council – AEA 6
Guest Presenter
Marshalltown

November 11, 1997
American Legion Auxiliary
"Teacher of the Year Story"
Marshalltown

November 12, 1997
Assistance League
"Issues in Education"
Marshalltown

November 12, 1997
Anson Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Classroom visits
Marshalltown

November 14-15, 1997
ISEA Student Program Fall
Instructional Workshop
"Reaching Students"
Des Moines

November 18, 1997
Hawthorne Meeting
"Teacher of the Year Experience"
Marshalltown

November 19, 1997
Red Oak Community Schools
Elementary: Reach for the Stars
Staff Dev: "Reaching Students"
Reception: ROEA
Red Oak

November 20, 1997
Iowa Association of School Bds
IASB Convention guest
Des Moines

November 20, 1997
MISTL Dinner
Participant
Hampton

November 21, 1997
ISEA MISTL
Workshop Leader:
1 "Going Beyond Tching..."
2 "Looking Outside the School to Know What to Teach"
Hampton-Dumont HS
Hampton

November 24, 1997
Glenwood Comm Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
After School Reception
Glenwood

November 25, 1997
Lewis Central School District
"Motivating, Monitoring, Reporting Achievement"
Council Bluffs

December 1, 1997
Estherville-Lincoln Central HS
Classroom visits/Interviews
Estherville

December 1, 1997
Spirit Lake Comm Schools
1 "Using rubrics to assess performance tasks"
2 "Assessment of Integrated Learning through technology"
Spirit Lake

December 2, 1997
Webster City
1 Kiwanis Club
2 "Reach for the Stars"
3 "Celebration of Teaching"

December 4-5, 1997
Iowa Educ Research Association
"Monitoring & Evaluation Achievement: Stories from the Classroom" & Breakout Session
Cedar Rapids

December 9, 1997
ICN Mtg: Distance Learning Participant
Star Schools Project (J Rottler)

December 10, 1997
Stilwill Junior High
Classroom visits & "Integrating Technology as a Learning Tool"
West Des Moines

December 11, 1997
Amity Meeting
"Teacher of the Year"
Marshalltown

December 12, 1997
Dept of Education
Conference with Ted Stilwill, Judy Jeffrey, Susan Fischer
Des Moines

December 12, 1997
Dept of Education
Conference with Dave Alvord
Des Moines

December 15, 1997
Delta Kappa Gamma
"Sharing Our Strengths"
Cutty's Barn (near Grimes)

December 16, 1997
Franklin Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

December 18, 1997
GMG Elementary
Classroom Visits
Green Mountain

December 18, 1997
Voices from the Classroom (ICN) Participant
Ames

December 19, 1997
Fisher Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

December 23, 1997
Fisher Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

December 23, 1997
Franklin Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

January 12, 1998
Dallas Center-Grimes Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
"Classroom Community"
Grimes

January 13, 1998
Price Lab School (UNI)
"Reach for the Stars"
Staff Dev: "School to Work"
Cedar Falls

January 14, 1998
Roland-Story Staff
"Reaching Students"
Story City

January 14, 1998
Hubbard/Radcliffe Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
Radcliffe

January 14, 1998
Hubbard/Radcliffe HS
Classroom visits and Interviews
Hubbard

January 15, 1998
Iowa State University
Meet with Nancy Maushak re: validating research
Ames

January 16, 1998
Central City Comm Schools
"Reaching Students," Interviews
Central City

January 19, 1998
Inservice for 4 schools
"Reaching Students"
Remsen

January 20, 1998
Woodbury Central Elem
"Reach for the Stars"
Interviews
Moville

January 21, 1998
Logan-Magnolia Schools
Classroom visits
Lunch with Teachers/Interviews
Logan

January 22, 1998
Harlan Comm Schools
Work with Language Arts teachers
Interviews
Harlan

January 26, 1998
Buena Vista University
Combined Education Classes
"Reaching Students"
Marshalltown

January 27, 1998
Boone Comm Schools
Classroom Visits/ Interviews
Boone

January 28, 1998
SE Webster School District
"Reach for the Stars"
Burnside

January 28, 1998
SE Webster School District
1 Staff Dev: "Reaching Students"
2 Community Mtg. with School Board: "School to Work"
Dayton

January 30, 1998
Simpson College
5 classes: Education Dept. incl. Student Teaching Seminar
Indianola

February 2, 1998
PEO Meeting Chapter BB
"Teacher of the Year Story"
Marshalltown

February 4, 1998
Pocahontas Area Comm. Schls
1 Elem: "Reach for the Stars"
2 Interviews
3 Staff Meeting
Pocahontas

February 5, 1998
Emmetsburg Comm Schools
" Empowering thru Technology"
Emmetsburg

February 6, 1998
Algona Comm Schools
Interviews and School Visits
Algona

February 9, 1998
Waldorf College
4 Classes: Education Dept
Conversations with Staff
Forest City

February 9-10, 1998
Forest City Comm Schools
School Visits, Interviews,
School Board Meeting,
"Reach for the Stars"
Rotary Club Meeting
Forest City

February 11, 1998
Lake Mills Community Schls
"Reaching thru Purpose"
Interviews
Lake Mills

February 12, 1998
Alburnett Community Schools
"Using Technology"
Interviews
Alburnett

February 13, 1998
ISEA MISTL
1 "Going Beyond Tching..."
2 "Looking Outside the School"
Howard-Winneshiek
Cresco

February 16, 1998
Harlan Community Schools
"Motivating Achievement"
Harlan

February 17, 1998
Charter Oak-Ute Schools
"Reaching Students"
Charter Oak

February 17, 1998
Denison Community Schools
Lunch with Staff, Interviews
Denison

February 18, 1998
NCA Visitation Team member
East Waterloo HS

February 19, 1998
One World ESL Conference
" Building a Sense of Belonging"
Des Moines

February 19, 1998
Department of Education
Conferences with Susan Fischer
Des Moines

February 20, 1998
Winterset Comm. Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
School/Classroom visits, Interviews
Winterset

February 23, 1998
Central Lee Comm. Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
PTA : "Sharing Strengths"
Donnellson

February 24, 1998
Durant Comm Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
Reception after School
Durant

February 25, 1998
T.O.Y. Luncheon/Speech
Des Moines

February 26, 1998
Manson Northwest Webster
"Reach for the Stars"
Manson and Barnum

February 27, 1998
Ackley-Geneva Inservice Day
" Reaching Students"
Ackley

March 2, 1998
Epsilon Chap. DKG
"Sharing Our Strengths"
Des Moines

March 2, 1998
Des Moines Public Schools
"Technical Communications: Training All Students for a Technical World"
Des Moines

March 2-5, 1998
Department of Education Team
College Evaluation Visit
Drake University
Visits to student teaching sites. Des Moines: Rice Elementary, Hoyt MS, Roosevelt HS. West Des Moines: Jordan Creek Elementary, Valley HS

March 6, 1998
Marshalltown HS Speech Class
Speaker, Q & A
Marshalltown

March 12, 1998
Marshall County Youth: Crime and Violence Commission
Planning Meeting for Panel
Marshalltown

March 13, 1998
Fisher Elem., Anson MS, Miller MS, High School
Meetings with students about technology
Marshalltown

March 16-19, 1998
Department of Education Team
College Evaluation Visit
Coe College
Visits to student teaching sites in Cedar Rapids: Jefferson HS, McKinley MS, Garfield Elementary and Johnson Elementary

March 19, 1998
Mtg with J. Jeffrey & D. Van Gorp
Little Amana

March 19, 1998
Marshalltown High School
Technology Interviews
Marshalltown

March 20, 1998
Lakewood Elementary
"Reach for the Stars"
Interviews
Norwalk

March 23, 1998
Marshalltown Schools
Technology Interviews
4 Fisher Elem., 2 Anson MS,
2 Miller MS, 1 MHS
Marshalltown

March 24, 1998
Marshalltown High School
Technology Interviews
Marshalltown

March 24, 1998
Department of Education
Conference with Susan Fischer and
Ruth Ann Gaines
Des Moines

March 25, 1998
Bedford Staff
Staff Development Workshop:
"Reaching Students"
Bedford

March 26, 1998
Stanton Elem
"Reach for the Stars"
Classroom Visits, Interviews
Stanton

March 27, 1998
Council Bluffs Schools
Visits to 5 schools/Interviews
Council Bluffs

March 30, 1998
Department of Education
Conference with Susan Fischer
Des Moines

March 31, 1998
Garwin-Green Mountain
"Reaching Students"
Garwin

April 1-2, 1998
Dept of Ed Schl Improvement &
Accreditation Team
Lynnville-Sully

April 2, 1998
Iowa Valley Comm College Panel:
"What Communities Can Do to
Improve Circumstances for Kids"
Marshalltown

April 5-6, 1998
All-State Speech Festival
Guest Critic
UNI, Cedar Falls

April 7, 1998
Storm Lake High School
Interviews
Storm Lake

April 7, 1998
Buena Vista University
Educational Career Day
" Reaching Students"
Storm Lake

April 8, 1998
Marshalltown HS
Faculty Meeting
"Prioritizing Ideas for Change"
Marshalltown

April 8, 1998
Marshalltown HS Honor Society
" Three Keys to Success"
Marshalltown

April 13, 1998
Guthrie Center Elementary
"Reach for the Stars"/Interviews
Guthrie Center

April 13, 1998
Delta Kappa Gamma Mtg
"Classroom Stories"
Guthrie Center

April 14, 1998
Menlo Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Menlo

April 15-16, 1998
NCA VisitationTeam member
East Waterloo HS

April 20, 1998
Pella Corporation Recognition
Banquet
"Why use technology to learn?"
Pella

April 20-21, 1998
Tech-Prep Conference
1 Technology: Creating the Links
to Skills and Empowerment
2 Learning Through Technology:
It's Happening—How Can it be
Assessed?
Des Moines

April 21, 1998
Department of Education
Conference with Ted Stilwill and
Susan Fischer
Des Moines

April 22-23, 1998
Fair Meadows Elem School
"Reach for the Stars" [9 groups]
Classroom Visits, Faculty Talk
West Des Moines

April 24, 1998
Jackson Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Des Moines

April 27-28, 1998
Sioux City Comm Schools
Tech Communications Wksp.
School Visits, Interviews
Sioux City

April 29, 1998
Sac Community Schools
Elem: Listener to Readers, Reach
for the Stars [2 groups]
Sac City

April 30-May 1, 1998
National Assessment Consortium
Participant & Presenter: "Creating
a Classroom Culture for Student
Achievement"
Ankeny School District

May 4, 1998
Marshalltown High School
Reading Assessment for 9th graders
Marshalltown

May 4, 1998
PEO Meeting Chapter LT
"Teacher of the Year"
Marshalltown

May 5, 1998
Iowa State University
Guest Speaker for English Methods
Class
Ames

May 6, 1998
Clarke Comm High School
Lunchroom staff conversations
Osceola

May 6, 1998
Central Decatur Comm Schools
"Reach for the Stars"
Decatur City

May 7, 1998
AEA 14 Superintendents Mtg
Presentation: Motivating, Monitoring, and Reporting Student Achievement
Creston

May 8, 1998
Independence High School
Lunchroom staff conversations
Independence

May 8, 1998
Wellsburg/Steamboat Rock HS
Student interview, Faculty discussions
Wellsburg

May 11, 1998
Iowa Valley Comm Schools
Lunchroom staff conversations
Marengo

May 12, 1998
Grinnell High School
Faculty Discussions, Viewed technology projects
Grinnell

May 13-16 1998
Washington Summit Participant (Marshalltown Delegation)
Meetings with congressional staff and representatives of federal agencies.
Meetings with Dept of Education Officials:
Office of Bilingual Education, Office of Vocational Education.
Washington, DC

May 18, 1998
Marshall County SATUCI
Planning meeting for focus groups to evaluate character building program at Woodbury Elementary
Marshalltown

May 19, 1998
Iowa Valley Comm College
Meeting of Washington Summit Education Committee
Marshalltown

May 20, 1998
Charles City High School
Classroom visits: innovative Spanish program and student Web Site projects
Charles City

May 20, 1998
Osage High School/Middle Schl
Lunchroom staff conversations
Osage

May 20, 1998
Northwood-Kensett Comm Schl
West Elem: character building
Northwood MS: 8th grade writing lesson
High School: After school reception
Northwood

May 21, 1998
Clear Lake Comm Schools
Sunset View Elem: 1st grade
Clear Lake

May 21, 1998
Dows Community Schools
Lunchroom staff conversations
Dows

May 23, 1998
Spirit Lake Comm Schools
Retiree Dinner Speaker:
"The Gifts of Education"
Spirit Lake

May 26, 1998
West High School
Classroom visit, conversation with staff
Davenport

May 26, 1998
Bettendorf Comm Schools
Interview with Superintendent
Bettendorf

May 26, 1998
Bettendorf High School
Conversations with Staff
Bettendorf

May 26, 1998
Muscatine High School
Dinner with staff member
Muscatine

May 27, 1998
Johnson Elementary School
Classroom visits
Cedar Rapids

May 28, 1998
Hoglan Elementary School
Classroom visits
Marshalltown

June 1, 1998
Woodbury Elementary Schl
5th Grade focus groups
Marshalltown

June 2, 1998
Hoglan Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

June 3, 1998
Hoglan Elementary School
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

June 3, 1998
Miller Middle School
7th grade assembly: "Future of Education"
Marshalltown

June 8, 1998
Department of Education
Conference with Ted Stilwill, Susan Fischer
Des Moines

June 21, 1998
Iowa Girls State
Speaker: Communications
UNI Campus, Cedar Falls

June 29, 1998
Salvation Army Summer Kids Program
"Reach for the Stars"
Marshalltown

July 8, 1998
Department of Education
Conference with Susan Fischer, Graphic Artist, Printer
Des Moines

September 10, 1998
Department of Education
Report to State School Board
Des Moines

November 20, 1998
Iowa School Board Association
Speaker: General Session
Des Moines